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ココロコネクト ミチランダム

庵田定夏

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「太一とは、付き合えません」  
太一は正式に伊織に告白し—  
玉砕した。異常な現象が起こって  
いても関係ないと、決死の覚  
悟で臨んだ想いは優く散り、そ  
の上、重い足を引きすり向かっ  
た部室でフられた事をメンバー  
に知られてしまう！ 部内は騒  
然となり、稻葉は動揺を隠せな  
い。伊織が場を取りなそうとし  
たその瞬間、彼女の心と感情が  
響き渡り……。そして、その日  
を境に永瀬伊織は変わってしまった—。  
愛と青春の五角形コ  
メディ、岐路と選択の第4巻！

## 庵田定夏

Sadanatsu Ando

1988年生まれ大阪出身。  
第11回えんため大賞特別賞を受賞しデビュー。好きな食べ物は「麺類全般」、嫌いな食べ物は「特になし」。好きなプロレスの技は「シューティングスター・プレス」、嫌いなプロレスの技は「見栄えより危険度の方が高い技全般」。健康と安全をモットーに生きてています。

## 白身魚

Shiromizakana

繊細かつ柔らかな絵柄で知られる実力派イラストレーター。「14歳」「少年少女」というキーワードにひたすら弱く、小説では「カラフル」「アーモンド入りチョコレートのワルツ」、実写では「花とアリス」などが好き。



ぼつりと永瀬がなにかを口にした。

ごめん







顔まで冷たい無表情。

意見を出すタイプの伊織が、無言を貫く。

いつもと違う雰囲気に、リズムが狂う。  
どう対応すべきか戸惑ってしまう。

ながせ いおり  
永瀬伊織

2/16



## 目

- 〈一 章〉 八重樫太一による告白 ..... 004
- 〈二 章〉 稲葉姫子にとってのバレンタイン ..... 044
- 〈三 章〉 青木義文なりの戦い方 ..... 069
- 〈四 章〉 八重樫太一にとっての恋愛事情 ..... 098
- 〈五 章〉 桐山唯による奮闘劇 ..... 121
- 〈六 章〉 稲葉姫子による覚悟 ..... 165
- 〈七 章〉 八重樫太一にとっての氷解 ..... 207
- 〈八 章〉 永瀬伊織による決着 ..... 259
- 〈九 章〉 八重樫太一にとっての転換点 ..... 295
- 〈終 章〉 永瀬伊織にとっての新章 ..... 306

## 次

## Prologue

[ *This is still wrong. This isn't what I wanted. I could no longer play the role of the perfect me.*

*No more. I've reached my limits. Impossible. I can't do it.*

*Was I a liar?*

*No.*

*I didn't lie. I really, really didn't lie. I absolutely did not lie.*

*Yet, reality is getting further from my ideals.*

*—The reason why I liked him was maybe because I thought my liking him was the expression of my ideal form—*

*I can't do it anymore.*

*I could no longer play the role of the perfect me.*

*...Nor could I even the normal me. ]*

## Chapter 1 - A Love Confession by Yaegashi Taichi

---

The appearance of «Heartseed», and the occurrence of aberrant phenomena— These events may serve as valid reasons of distress, however, only a coward would use them as excuses.

Not to mention, they had sworn together.

As long as they keep it under control, they would overcome it together. And then, if possible, make it truly be the end.

Their countermeasure was to continue living normally.

It had already been a week since. Nothing had happened so far, so there shouldn't be any problem.

In order to not fall behind everyone else, he too treated his current situation as part of his reality and went about his life as usual.

Yaegashi Taichi had come to his resolution.

Today, he would end his half-hearted situation with his own hands. He would not allow himself to remain spoiled any longer.

The day was the thirteenth of February, one day before the Valentine's Day.

This was his personal deadline.

Gifting chocolate on Valentine's Day is a special tradition thanks to the efforts of Japanese confectionery making and retailing industry.

There were occasions where people would give chocolate to their friends or simply have some for themselves, but between boys and girls, this tradition holds a single, significant meaning.

Fourteenth of February, Valentine's Day—the day where girls would present their feelings to the boys of their affection through their gift.

Two girls had shown their affection towards Taichi.

If he doesn't resolve it before the fourteenth, he would most likely receive two presents.

As a man, Taichi could not tolerate himself doing nothing while being fully aware of such a fact, and passively await the arrival of the fourteenth.

He must give an answer.

Hence, he asked the person of his affection to meet him behind the east school building after school.

He was worried that the other CRC members would hear him, but it seemed that he was over thinking it... at least he hoped he was over thinking it.

And now.

That person was standing in front of Yaegashi Taichi.

"This... might be an awkward timing, but I don't think it matters anymore... I must say it now... No, I mean I must tell you now."

As Taichi finished, the other responded "Okay" with a light nod.

His heart began racing.

His feet quivered and his mouth became numb.

His chest wrenched; he felt like he was about to throw up.

Foo... Taichi let out a deep breath. He readied himself for his greatest challenge of his life.

He looked forward.

*Don't run away, make up your mind,* he told himself in his mind.

*Fight.*

Then, he spoke.

He spoke once more the words that he had spoken before to Nagase Iori.

"I... I love you and I'm still sure of it. Therefore, would you... go out with me?"

He said it.

He said it.

He finally said it.

Taichi said it—the words that carried a different weight than before, he finally said them.

He moved forward, and confronted his once-in-a-lifetime challenge.

Now, he could only wait, and see how the other would respond.

Nagase heard his words and lowered her head, as if to hide her expression.

Then, she turned around, facing Taichi with her back.

*Would she accept my feelings? Would she consider my confession?*

Taichi thought to himself.

They had come a long way.

It had been a long time since he first confessed to her. He should have come to this point sooner. How long had he made her wait? Thinking that he had been such an embarrassment, Taichi could never bring himself to say "Free me from this suspense, please give me an answer" or anything of that sort.

Taichi remained silent, and fixated upon Nagase.

Her back view was beautiful.

Her tied hair looked sweet and petite.

Her happy look, angry look, sorrowful look, joyful look. Nagase possessed more expressions than anyone else that no one would ever get tired of.

However, what Taichi truly loved, was her smile that was bright as the sun.

"—I'm sorry."

Nagase murmured something.

But Taichi didn't hear her properly.

"Eh?"

"...I'm really sorry."

...Sorry?

She said 'sorry,' what did she mean?

"...I cannot... go out with you, Taichi."

He couldn't believe it.

He didn't want to believe it.

The confession was not sudden—both of them had already exchanged their feelings before.

Didn't Nagase... have feelings for Yaegashi Taichi?

"I keep feeling that... this isn't right. So... about what I've said before... that I love Taichi, please... pretend it'd never happened."

That was the final blow to Taichi.

No glossing over, no escaping. Taichi couldn't feel anything even though he was aware of the situation. His mind went blank.

"...I'll be going."

Nagase left these words, and began to walk away quickly.

Wait.

Why?

Why?

A thousand words raced through his head, but Taichi couldn't get his mouth to work.

"...W—Wh... Why? Nagase!"

Words finally came through.

Was it pitiful for him to say that? But Taichi had to ask.

Nagase stopped, and said in a shaking voice:

"...I....I..."

But she did not finish the sentence.

Before she spoke again—

[ *This isn't right. I'm not the kind of person Taichi thinks I am.* ]

Nagase's inner voice echoed clearly, without doubt, in Taichi's mind.

At the same time, there was a burning yet murky, odd and incomprehensible feeling that wasn't his own pierced through Taichi.

"...Ah."

Nagase seemed to have realised that her thoughts were heard by Taichi.

She started to run.

She ran quickly, as though she was saying, she didn't want to linger another minute longer.

Taichi stood motionless, alone on the spot, like an abandoned puppy on the streets.

A northern breeze blew, and Taichi's body began to waver.

"This can't be... What's going on..."

Taichi did not understand.

Had he done something that upset Nagase?

Even though Taichi never thought of it this way, was it because he had been comforting himself in a position where he could choose, that made Nagase upset?

"...Why...?"

Taichi murmured absently.

He didn't understand. He did not understand it at all.

Yet, no matter how much he refused to understand, the answer was clear before him. He could only accept the truth.

"...I've been rejected."

In other words, this meant—

----- The Love Story of Yaegashi  
Taichi, The End.

□■□■□

Valentine's Day — The day that would make any high school boy across Japan restless.

"It's just the 14th of February, what's the big deal?" Some boys would say that, and pretend that it was just another day. But in truth, even these individuals couldn't help but keep an extra eye on the girls' movements.

Not surprisingly, the boys from the Yamaboshi Private High were exceptionally excited.

The same could also be said for the girls. The air among them was brewing with enthusiasm.

While the entire school ground was filled with this anticipating, dubious yet spirited atmosphere, Yaegashi Taichi alone dragged himself along the hallway with footsteps many times heavier than others.

Seeing the enthusiastic and anticipating students around the school, Taichi felt infuriated for a moment, but was quickly overcome by a certain emptiness.

"Sigh..."

Taichi had lost count of how many times he had sighed since yesterday.

Until yesterday, he never once imagined himself to greet such a significant day like this.

He thought it would be another bright and wonderful day, but...

Students passing by glanced at Taichi and gave him a strange but surprised eye.

Taichi knew fully how gloomy he must look.

*I probably look like crap right now.*

He knew, but he couldn't bring himself to cheer up at all.

Yesterday, too, he had been grumbling depressingly towards himself.

Should he not have confessed during the phenomenon? He had been warned before. But this time was different though. Not to mention, this had nothing to do with the phenomenon... It was all because he kept thinking that his inner thoughts were exposed.

Having his hidden thoughts exposed to others.

And finding out the hidden thoughts of others.

This created many kinds of problems.

However...

It won't create any problems, it will be alright; they will overcome it together, and end it once and for all —— They had sworn to get through this together.

*Luckily they haven't found out about the most crucial factor of the problem yet. It will be fine. Now stop thinking... Stop thinking...*

Taichi kept repeating that thought to himself.

Yet his mind was still stuck in the same state.

—*Clak*, Taichi slid open the door and entered his classroom of class 1C.

"Yo, Yaegashi! It's Valentine's Day, we gotta be more..."

Taichi's friend, Watase Shingo, suspended his chatter.

"Oi, Yaegashi... What's up with you?"

"...Nothing."

"Eh, but your face looks as if the girl you fancied came up to you, with what looked to be a chocolate wrapper, and said 'This is empty, can you throw it out for me?' So you went 'Hey hey, you know you want to give me chocolate yet you said to 'throw it out'. What are you, tsundere?' Never would have thought they actually exist in reality. Then, as you were really excited, you realised there really isn't any chocolate and that she really was asking you to throw it out... Anyway, you don't look 'nothing' to me at all."

"...I don't think my expression was that detailed."

Watase's story sounded surprisingly convincing, could it have been what happened to him?

"Well, cheer up. If you keep up with that look, you'll scare away all the chocolates you might receive!"

Truth be told, Taichi didn't care about how many chocolate he would receive.

The only one he truly wanted was the one from that person.

However, the chance of that happening — had become zero.

Before Taichi realised it, it was already the last class of the day. Taichi had no recollection of the lectures, nor whether he had made any notes. Yet he hadn't been called on by a teacher. Or was it because he actually made notes in his subconscious?

*It's almost the end of class*, Taichi thought to himself.

What would normally be a joyful end of class bell chime, sounded like one from hell to the current Taichi. He felt like a prisoner waiting to be executed... Actually, that might be over-exaggerating.

He wasn't really dying, but his mood made him feel like he was dying.

Taichi was not able to converse with Nagase for the whole day, or even look at her face.

However, club activity still awaited him after school.

He went straight home yesterday due to the shock from being rejected, but he couldn't bring himself to do that twice in a row.

*I have to show up.*

But if he goes to the club room, he is bound to meet with Nagase Iori.

Taichi and Nagase.

The guy who was rejected, and the girl who rejected.

It would be embarrassing. No matter how one would try to perceive it, it would be very embarrassing.

Not to mention, Inaba would be there as well.

Even though he had not proclaimed it yet, Taichi rejected Inaba.

In other words, Nagase(the rejector,) Inaba(the rejected,) and Taichi(the rejector and rejected) would gather in the same hall.

That would be awkward beyond words.

Nagase would probably feel the same too. 'Maybe I should just sit out for Nagase's sake' — Taichi gave serious thought to such a foolish idea.

*Ugh... Useless, pathetic, good for nothing.*

It was not going well. At this rate he would lose all confidence in himself and feel completely worthless.

If this feeling was found out, he would be utterly embarrassed.

*Embarrassing, embarrassing, so embarrassing! I just want to wipe myself off the face of the earth! Dammit, I'm now stuck in a pessimistic loop again. Didn't I swear not to repeat the same mistake again? Didn't I learn it the hard way during the 'Desire Unleash' phenomenon? Stop thinking, don't cause any trouble, we are going to overcome it together, we must, I must...*

"Yaegashi-kun... can I have a moment with you?"

As the after school hours arrived, Taichi, still trapped within his murky thoughts, was halt by the class 1C representative—Fujishima Maiko.

Taichi did not have the reason nor will to decline, so he nodded and went along.

As they exited the classroom, Taichi could hear chatters like "Fujishima's target is Yaegashi?" "The love expert herself is finally joining the battle!" "It's finally time for the expert to show what she's got in her sleeves~" "Hey! Yaegashi, weren't you supposed to be after other girls? Hey, I thought you knew who my target is! C'mon man!" (That last remark was most likely Watase's.)

Just as he was wondering where they were heading, Taichi found themselves at the roof of the class building.

Even though the roof was open for use (they even have benches for student use,) in these wintry times, no one would want to bring themselves up here for the chilling wind.

In fact, Taichi was feeling extremely cold.

"Oi, Fujishima, aren't you cold? You didn't even bring your coat."

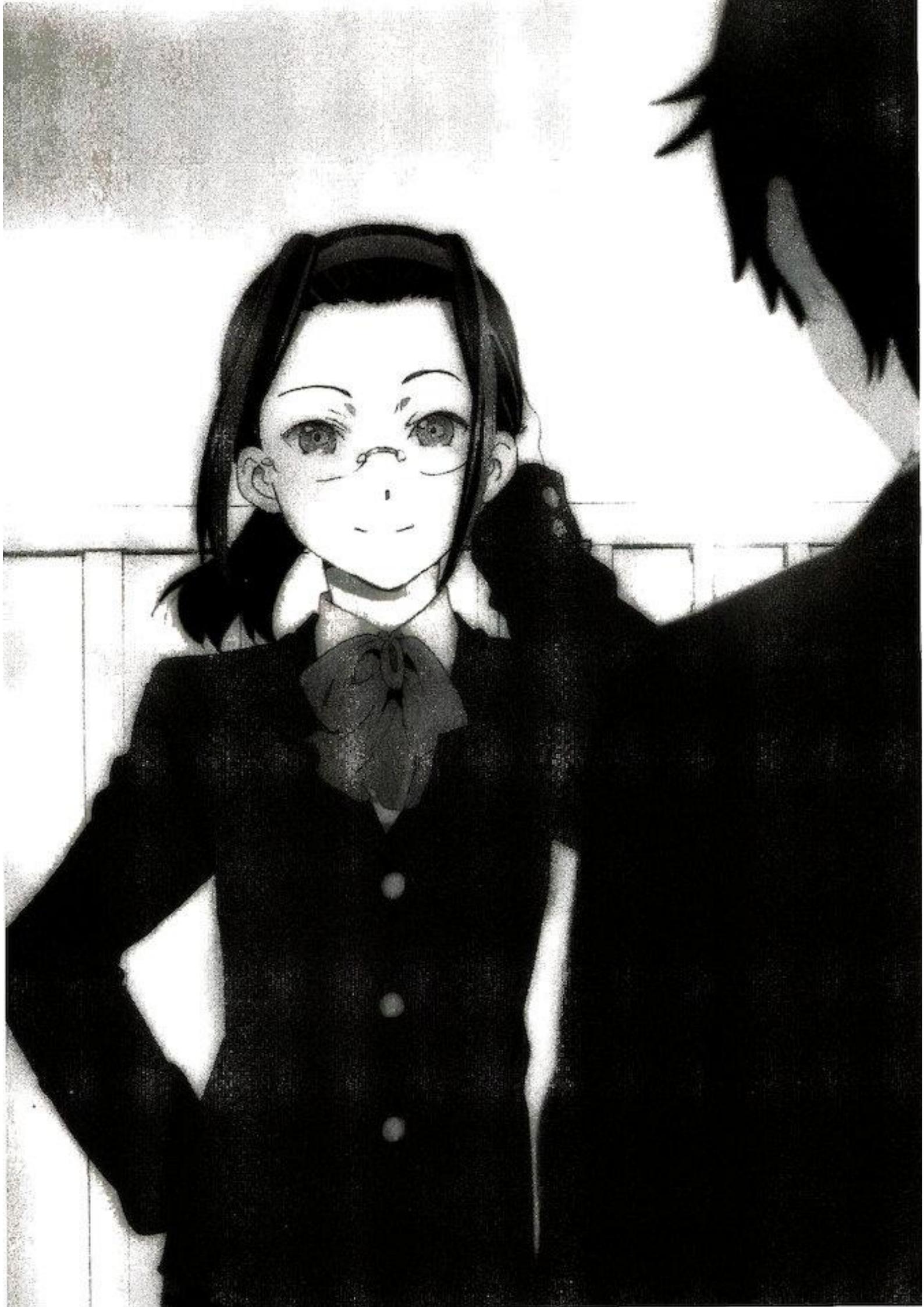
Taichi inquired, then Fujishima, who had been staying quiet the whole time, spun around and faced him.

After briefly stroking her hair, Fujishima, who had tied her hair into a ponytail which revealed her forehead, finally spoke:

"Yaegashi-kun, you seem to be running into some trouble with love. By the way, this cold is nothing in front of my burning heart right now, so there's no need to worry."

Her glasses gleamed sharply as she lifted it.

Taichi knew well that Fujishima could not hear his thoughts, yet she still read right through him. As expected from the 'Missionary of Love' (self-proclaimed by Fujishima.)



"...I am, but that has nothing to do with you though right? Please stay out of this."

There was no point in venting his anger towards Fujishima, but Taichi couldn't stop himself from lashing back at her.

"It's Valentine's Day, the top season for love. Everybody is absorbed in anticipation, yet you're walking around with that discouraging, gloomy look of yours. That's kinda problematic you know."

"I know, I feel bad for it too."

He responded coldly when his friend tried to converse with him after all.

"Does it have to do with Nagase-san?"

"...Yeah."

Taichi knew Fujishima would not let him go even if he told her off, so he nodded in reply. Though, half of his reason was out of self-depreciation.

"You're not rejected, are you?"

Those words echoed heavily in Taichi's mind.

"Yeah."

In order to make himself accept this hard truth, Taichi nodded in confirmation.

Fujishima's eyes widened in shock.

"You're kidding... Is it true? I've been watching all these time, I thought you two were going great."

"...I'm not kidding."

"I see..."

As he saw Fujishima lower her head heavily, Taichi felt his chest wrenching.

He wanted to tell her that, there was no need for her to feel bad for him.

Just as he thought that, however, Fujishima lifted her head—

"MY · CHANCE · HAS · COME!!!"

—And shouted with extreme excitement towards the sky.

Taichi could not believe what he was seeing: Could this really be happening in reality?

Just as somebody else was heartbroken over love, she openly expressed her joy for it... No, Taichi forgot one important thing: Fujishima had been after Nagase all these time! What had he done!?

"Ah! Sorry, Yaegashi-kun, I accidentally prioritised my joy."

"...I'm just gonna say this first: Just because I've been rejected doesn't mean you've won."

"Yeah, yeah, so says the underdog. Thanks for your hard work. Hehehe~"

"Grrr... Why you..."

*What's with that sympathising look?* Taichi wished she would stop treating him like an idiot.

"Truth to be told~ Haha~ You two were getting along so well~ Pff~ Yet you got ditched~ Ahaha~ This is the funniest thing ever~!"

"A—Are you trying to pick a fight or something? And besides, since when did you become this expressive? You're like a completely different character!"

"Phew, you look better now. Using my normally exercise-lacking facial muscles sure is exhausting."

As Fujishima said that, her expression returned to her usual calmness. She even pound her shoulders as if relaxing her muscles.

"What's that supposed to mean... it's like you're..."

It was like she was playing as some sort of weird character just to cheer him up.

*What on earth are you, Fujishima Maiko?*

"So this is what people mean by getting good out of misfortune! This is just fascinating ★"

"You really are happy about it aren't you? And are you really trying to treat me like an idiot?"

*Seriously, what on earth are you, Fujishima Maiko?*

"Anyway, cheer up Yaegashi-kun."

She finally returned to her usual, serious demeanour.

"While I don't know the details, the fact that you gave your answer before Valentine's Day is actually very commendable. Did I say it right?"

"...You sure know it quite well."

"Who do you think I am? I'm everyone's Goddess of Love!"

Before anyone realised, Fujishima had ascended to godhood. She was slowly moving towards the higher realm.

"Well, there's no point beating yourself at it here. Why don't you take this as an opportunity and try going out with Inaba-san?"

"...! How? When did you notice I and Inaba..."

*When did she find out? This is terrifying, dear Goddess of Love!*

"Well I knew from the start that Inaba-san had feelings for you, Yaegashikun. I mean she's completely in girl-in-love mode, it's kind of hard not to notice. In fact, she's already at the point where I find it absurd that nobody else's noticed."

She was right.

It was exactly because Inaba treasured him so much, that...

He could no longer return her feelings.

When he was forced to choose between the two in the end, he did not choose Inaba.

To ask her out because he was rejected by the other —— Taichi would not tolerate himself to commit such a disgraceful act. He would never forgive himself if he did.

——*I don't see why not.*

For a moment, Taichi thought his thoughts were transmitted towards Fujishima and was briefly startled —— of course, that couldn't be the case.

"There's nothing wrong with asking another person out after being rejected. Based on both the usual circumstances and my experience, it's not at all uncommon that the rejected one and the one who comforts them get together."

"But that's just..."

"Of course you can! 'Love' does change after all. Especially if you have feelings for each other... Or we can take a step back and say, suppose you

don't have feelings right now, but you know that you will eventually, then I think it's fine."

"That isn't something fitting for the Missionary of Love to say, is it?"

"Of course it is. I stand by the principle that 'Love is Free.' Then again, I agree that you have to be honest with each other. However, if you become overly rigid with the rules and get yourself stuck, don't you think that's wrong too?"

*But that's just my personal opinion,* Fujishima added towards the end.

At that moment—

[ *Now, what would be a good time to give him the chocolate?* ]

Taichi heard the voice of Inaba Himeko far away from scene.

He could feel the warmth and anticipation of Inaba Himeko's heart.

Then he remembered something very important:

Taichi had originally planned to tell Inaba that he could not return her feelings yesterday, but he had completely forgotten about it.

No, rather than forgetting, it was more like things had completely derailed from his plan and put him at a complete loss.

"And besides, experience matters in everything. Since it's Yaegashi-kun, I suppose I could tell you how I really think. To be honest, we're just ordinary high-schoolers. We don't even know how to begin spelling 'Love,' so it's alright for us to keep trying and learn from our mistakes."

Fujishima said with a brief smile.

At that moment, Fujishima was not the love expert, nor she was the Missionary of Love or the Goddess of Love.

Even though it was a given fact, Taichi couldn't help but think that, Fujishima was just another ordinary girl after all.

"If you can accept yourself giving up on Nagase-san, then you and Inaba-san could also be a pretty good match."

"But that's just..."

That would be terrible towards Inaba.

"And then, while Yaegashi-kun and Inaba-san are being all lovey-dovey with each other, I'll happily take Nagase-san for myself ❤"

"So that's still your main goal after all!"

*Her thoughts are still a mystery.*

However, one thing Taichi could be certain was that Fujishima tried to tell him something important. He also cheered up slightly from his dejected mood.

□■□■□

Thanks to Fujishima, Taichi felt slightly loosened up, enough so that he could bring himself to head to club room.

Since he had already sworn not to cause any trouble, there would be no reason for him to stay depressed. Simply having others to stay well wasn't enough; Taichi, himself, also needed to stay well.

With his lessons engraved deep in his heart, Taichi brought up his courage and entered the club room.

But God seemed to have no bounds of being merciless.

It would pick with the worst timing to bestow them a problem that had nothing to do with unreality, but rather the reality.

They were in room 401 of the recreational building after school. Nagase Iori and Inaba Himeko, the president and vice president of the Cultural Research Club respectively, were relaying to the remaining three members what they had heard from their homeroom teacher of class 1C and club advisor.

"He even said at the end: 'I'm really sorry for bringing up this serious topic when you are busying yourselves with Valentine's Day... Hm? Well it doesn't seem to be that serious, we're just changing advisors. Anyway, that sums it up. Please understand~'"

Nagase repeated Gotou's lines.

Taichi tried to keep his mind blank, only listening the words he heard. *Pretend that it's not Nagase's voice, this is a synthesised voice, this is synthesised, synthesised...*

"What he mean by 'Please understand'!? Dammit! This is a life and death situation for us!"

An angrily hollering Inaba Himeko hit on the desk with a loud bang.

Today's vice president of the CRC, with her ice beauty features and her trademark jet black hair, was spunky as usual.

*Easy, easy~* Kiriyama tried to calm Inaba down.

"Calm down, Inaba, Go-san doesn't know why it's a big problem for us after all—"

Kiryama paused for a moment, then she pulled her chestnut-brown hair back behind her ears and continued:

"And... what you're thinking in your head is too menacing... You don't need to imagine torturing the poor guy like that you know..."

It seemed that Inaba's hidden thoughts were transmitted to Kiriyama.

After being called out by Kiriyama, Inaba stiffened for a moment and bit her lip, but soon after, she smiled at Kiriyama and said:

"Hmph, of course."

Seeing Inaba maintain her snarky demeanour, Kiriyama smiled in relief.

It won't matter even if our thoughts are revealed to each other—they had proven this beautifully.

"Anyway... What should we do now?"

Aoki Yoshifumi's lanky body joggled about like his slight-curly hair.

Since Taichi had tried very hard to separate the words from the voices, he remembered what Nagase and Inaba said clearly.

Allegedly, Gotou would be transferring to his new post next semester.

Allegedly, when that happens, according to school policy, he may only take part as an advisor for one club.

Allegedly, Gotou was the advisor for both the Cultural Research Club and the Jazz Band, hence he must withdraw from one of the two.

Allegedly, he couldn't bring himself to choose which one to withdraw from, so he was planning to withdraw from the club with the lower score in the coming club presentation at the end of the semester... Something like that.

It was a topic that was out of the blue, but it was obviously a serious matter.

Inaba said: "To be honest, Gotou never made any contributions to the CRC, so I was tempted to say feel free to replace our advisor. But at the same time, it is all thanks to him that we're able to remain carefree with our club activities."

In Yamaboshi High, its variety of club activities was a well known feature, almost any club could be admitted and established. In return, the school demanded a required 'standard' of quality for student's club activities. In other words, students must earn their privileges.

"Normally there wouldn't be any problem for us to work seriously on our club activities, but right now we're being plagued by «Heartseed» and his troublesome friends..."

Half a year had passed since «Heartseed» first caught them, yet he showed no signs of loosening his grip. Due to «Heartseed»'s interference to their daily lives, «Cultural Research News» had already been delayed once, twice, even thrice.

"We don't know how long they will keep it going; even if we beg them to stop, they won't leave us alone. Under these circumstances, having Gotou, who rarely ever comes to the club room, as our advisor... is actually an advantage."

Inaba's word left Kiriyama sighing.

"If our advisor is the serious and prompting type of teacher, it would be a headache for us... Even though it's supposed to be a good thing!"

Taichi thought he should comment on it as well, so he asked:

"I've heard about the club presentation before... but what exactly is it?"

"This I can explain."

Inaba said, and proceeded to break it down to Taichi briefly.

After final exams, the school would organise a club presentation event that spans for several days.

The purpose of the presentation was to simply report the clubs' accomplishments over the year, but the presentation score would also affect how much budget they were going to get to share, so in truth, it was more like a promotional performance for them.

The judges would consist of five teachers and five members of the student council.

The stage was arranged to be the media classroom. In order to maintain openness to the public (and to avoid having too many empty seats,) regular students were also allowed to spectate.

The content of presentation would have to stay true to Yamaboshi High's motif, in that it could be anything within comprehensible grounds. Students would have up to 15 minutes for their presentation.

"In any case we should find some more information about the presentation event first, as well as inspect the Jazz Band's strength, then we can figure out how to beat them... Ah, why don't we just barge into the Jazz Band now? We can see for ourselves what they're up to. Two birds with one stone, don't you think?" Nagase suggested in a cheerful tone.

She was acting so normal that it became terrifying; she looked as though she had already forgotten the fact that she had rejected Taichi.

Did she not care about what happened the day before? If that was the case, it would be quite sad. Or perhaps she did care, but she didn't show it? If that was the case, she was simply too good at hiding her emotions.

*If the phenomenon can trigger at a good time, maybe I'll know what Nagase really thinks...* Taichi thought, and immediately felt disgusted at himself.

In the end, they headed out to visit the Jazz Band on Nagase's suggestion.

"Now that I think about it, if the Jazz Band thinks 'it wouldn't matter even if the advisor isn't Gotou,' wouldn't that solve the problem? We can negotiate with them too, to ask them to cede Gotou to us. But seriously, why is this turning out like we're competing for Gotou? It's sickening."

Inaba murmured to herself as she led in the front, while Taichi and the others followed closely behind.

They arrived at the practice room of the Jazz Band, the second music classroom.

"Oh hello, Yaegashi-kun, Inaba-san... and Nagase-san."

The person greeting them in front of the music room was Shiroyama Shouto, who belonged to class 1C with Taichi. He was a rare cheerful and

handsome boy by modern standards, and was quite an easy-going person where people could naturally accept his comparably courteous manner of speaking. Some people in the class jokingly nicknamed him as the 'Prince.'

"Oh, Shiroyama you're in the Jazz Band?"

Taichi asked. He was not close to Shiroyama, but being classmates of the same class, they were able to converse casually.

"Yes. I remember Yaegashi-kun you are... from the the Cultural Research Club, am I right? How can we help you?"

Taichi explained their purpose. Shiroyama mused for a bit, and showed a hesitant look.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Oh it's nothing... I'm afraid we can't compromise to that, because we really wish Gotou-sensei can remain our club advisor."

Shiroyama's remark made Inaba burst out "Wha—!?" with a brazen look of disgust.

"Why? Is there any particular reason that you want that sloppy guy to be your advisor?"

"Aren't we the same?"

Shiroyama smiled wryly and led Taichi and the others in the music room.

A Jazz Band band was rehearsing, and the one who stood in the middle was...

The performer that was playing his saxophone with such exceptional skill that even a rookie could tell, was none other than— Gotou Ryuuzen.

"What..."

Taichi was speechless.

Gotou continued his awe-inspiring performance. While they did not understand how it worked, Gotou appeared to be leading the band with utmost expertise.

As the performance ended, a mesmerised Taichi forgotten his original purpose and applauded. The same went for the other members (minus Inaba.)

Kiriyama, Aoki and Nagase said after each other:

"Go-san you're amazing!"

"That was awesome!"

"The other members are very good too!"

Nagase's word made Shiroyama replied shyly: "It's nothing, I'm not that good, really. Hahaha."

"I don't think she's complimenting you but... okay." Taichi jabbed at that remark anyway.

"Hm, what's up? Why is everybody from the CRC here?"

Gotou asked in his usual carefree tone.

"...I've heard gossip about your musical prowess, but I've always deemed them as false rumours..."

Inaba seemed reluctant to admit it for some reason.

"By the way, it's not much compared to his saxophone skills... but Gotou-sensei is pretty adapt at all kinds of instruments as well."

Shiroyama added.

"Ugh... So, about that impossible rumour that Gotou was once invited to join a professional band, is that..."

"Ohh~ I seem to recall something like that! But it was way back then."

Gotou did not act pretentious, and replied simply.

But Inaba sure knew a lot, as expected from an information collecting hobbyist.

"Gotou... why did you become a physics teacher? If you want to teach, you could also teach music no?"

"You ask me why, but it's because I like physics."

At that moment, Gotou was very cool.

□■□■□

The five returned to their club room and began discussion once more.

"Well, it looks like the Jazz Band won't be letting Go-san go now~"

Nagase said, and Inaba replied:

"But we can't back off either. At least not right now, no matter what."

Not that they had high hopes to begin with, but their attempt to negotiate had failed just like that. Inaba tried doing what she does best, offering a deal with information, but the Jazz Band was determined on their stance.

"So I guess we'll be facing them head on?"

Aoki said, then Kiriyama sighed:

"Their performance spoke volumes about their skill. If we want to beat them, we gotta bring out something impressive too..."

"Club presentation... Looks like we'll need to show them the best of ourselves and start brainstorming."

Inaba nodded in agreement at Taichi.

"Even with his expertise in music, Gotou still proclaimed to use the presentation score as the basis of his decision. I suppose we should thank him for that. Does he really think it doesn't matter which club he advises? Or was it out of fairness? Oh whatever, I bet he wasn't thinking of anything at all, pfft!"

Inaba clicked her tongue, and continued:

"So now what? Should we come up with some ideas first? Even though they said we're free to present anything, we should still stick to what we do in our club activities. So based on our function, we'd be presenting in form of an oral presentation..."

Suddenly, Aoki jumped up from his seat.

"Indeed we are now facing a crisis that we can't afford to lose, and we gotta think about it clearly too. But!" Aoki raised his fist in the air, and began his passionate speech. "Isn't there something more important than that today, my friends?"

Mid February. Today was—

Aoki peered around the room, nobody spoke a single word.

"...Odd. Why is nobody agreeing with me?"

"Ao—Aoki, that's..."

Kiryama stuttered embarrassingly.

"We're kinda caught in this strange situation, I think we need not to bring it up..."

"That's exactly why we should bring it up now! Rather than being found out at the most awkward timing, we should openly express ourselves! Isn't that our measure this time, Inaba-chan?"

"Um... Yeah I guess."

Inaba stuttered as well.

"Not to mention, there's no reason to hide 'Who you're giving chocolate to' or 'Which one is giri-choko, which one is honmei-choko' [\[1\]](#) and other love topics like that, right?"

"...Hmm, after a second thought, you're right. I'm curious about Iori and Inaba's plans too~ Even if I ask them, they tend to just gloss it over~"

Kiryama said with a happy smile. It was a smile that spoke her confidence in a bright outcome.

Not to be affected by any abnormal phenomenon, to live as they would usually do, to not create any problems, and overcome the challenge without anyone getting hurt.

Aoki and Kiriyama took the perfect course of action, but...

*Wouldn't it be risky? Is it okay? No, it will be okay...* At least Taichi would like to believe as such.

"Hey, Inaba, I know it was a while back, but didn't you ask me for tips on making sweets? I was like 'Could it be?' I highly doubt Inaba would be the type to gift giri-choco to boys in class!"

"That's because..."

Inaba had not told that to Kiriyama and Aoki yet—

*[ How am I suppose to tell anyone right now, that I truly love Taichi... ]*

Taichi heard them clearly. The words that Inaba deemed herself 'not able to say.'

While they had no idea how it really worked, presently, Taichi and the others' inner thoughts would be 'randomly exposed' within the group. In

other words, their inner voices and feelings would transmit to one another on their own.

Taichi suppressed his racing heart and peeked at everyone else's expression.

Even though they are under such a phenomenon, their inner voice would not necessarily be leaked to everyone. The one who hears it was also randomly determined. It could be one, it could be four. And in this case, Taichi was the first to hear Inaba's thoughts.

Who else heard it besides him? Or was he lucky enough to be the only one?

The answer was clear upon seeing the others' expression.

Both Kiriyma and Aoki heard it.

Also, since 'Inaba's feelings' were transmitted together with her words, they could fully feel that it was a feeling that wasn't just for talks.

It seemed Nagase was the only one not in sync.

"Eh? What's up? Was someone's thought exposed?"

She asked carefreely.

"Ahh, er~ I see, oh..."

Aoki said with a difficult look on his face. Kiriyma whispered next to him:

"So... it's really true..."

"...I used to think this might have been the case, but she seemed to support Taichi and Iori... In fact, Inaba once discussed with me, that she wanted to 'match them two together,' so all this time I thought Inaba liked somebody else, hence... Ah!"

Kiriyma realised that she got too talkative and shut her mouth.

Inaba quickly recovered from her frozen state and said:

"An—Anyway, don't worry about it, the matter was already resolved. I've been wanting to find a chance to explain... b—but..."

Inaba was panic-stricken.

"That's why I... But... Because... Erm... Uch!"

Inaba pound around her thigh twice, faced forward and exhaled in a laughing manner.

"That's right... It's the truth. Our situation is interesting. Iori and I are competing for Taichi, isn't it funny?"

Inaba openly proclaimed to the dumbfounded Kiriyama and Aoki.

"But like I just said, you don't need to worry about whether it would create any problems. Am I right? Iori, Taichi."

Taichi was startled from suddenly being inquired like that. The same went for Nagase. But, he had to say something.

"...Yeah, it will be fine... Even though it's odd for me to say it."

Taichi answered.

However, he probably would not need to worry any more.

Because that story was over.

Because—

*[ I confessed to Nagase yesterday, and I was rejected. Completely rejected. ]*

Taichi's heart jumped.

He knew his thoughts were heard.

And he knew who heard them.

Inaba, Kiriyama, Aoki, Nagase.

In other words, everyone heard it.

They too, all felt what Taichi was feeling.

"Eh... Uh! E—Ehhhhhh!?"

"Wha—Wha—What!?"

Aoki and Kiriyama were too shocked for words.

A trembling voice came to Taichi's ears.

"What does that mean..."

It was Inaba's voice.

"...I know I'm the third wheel who butt in between you two afterwards... I understand I have no right to say this, but... you do know I've prepared

chocolate for you today right? ...I mean... You heard my thoughts, didn't you...?"

Inaba's distorted expression looked as though she was about to cry.

"What is this... What about my feelings..."

"...Ah, uh, that..."

Taichi lowered his head, avoiding Inaba's eyes. Even though he knew that he mustn't run away, he was unable to look at her face to face.

He could not bring himself to look at how much he had hurt Inaba.

*Let me run away*, this thought caused Taichi to say the worst choice of words:

"...I'm sorry."

Taichi knew how much this would further hurt Inaba.

"You say sorry... you mean..."

Even without looking at her, Taichi was able to picture Inaba's shocked expression in his mind.

In fact, those words had became a rejection sentence for Inaba.

Taichi never wanted to tell her like this.

In the end, he thought that it was his fault it ended up this way.

Inaba smacked the table with a loud bang. Her anger spread through the air on impact.

"What is the meaning of this Iori!? What do you mean you rejected him!?"

If she was in her usual calm demeanour, Inaba wouldn't flip out this violently.

*It's my fault that she's lashing out at Nagase*, Taichi thought. *This is terrible.*

Nagase, startled, waved both her hands at Inaba.

"Eh... It's true that I rejected him... B—But calm down first—"

[ *This is none of your business anyway, why are you flipping out on me?* ]

A voice from Nagase that sounded completely different to what she said, echoed in Taichi's mind.

Nagase's sentiment, that was extremely cold yet contained an emanating heat, was transmitted along, embroiling Taichi's mind.

Was it extremely cold because she was watching Inaba from an indifferent angle? Was heat building up because she was angry?

"...Ah."

Inaba winced and backed away like she was in fear.

It seemed Taichi was not the only one who felt Nagase's sentiment. Inaba did as well.

"N— No it's not like that, Inaban! I'm not trying to blame you—"

[ *What are you feeling so dejected for? You're the one who flipped first, how petulant can you get?* ]

The phenomenon triggered, and Nagase's thoughts and sentiments were transmitted to Taichi once again.

Even though she may be right, if these were transmitted to Inaba as well, it would be too cruel.

But why did the phenomenon trigger several times in a row? Was this how it was meant to be?

More importantly, Nagase she—

[ *She's so different than what my impression of her was.* ]

Taichi could tell that his inner voice and feelings were transmitted to Nagase.

Also, in Taichi's mind, he could also hear something else.

[ *lori is scary.* ]

[ *Is lori-chan that type of character?* ]

These were words leaked from Kiriyama and Aoki's thoughts.

Kiriyama and Aoki's thoughts were coincidentally heard by Taichi. Then, were these words forwarded to Nagase as well? Also, was there anyone else's thought he didn't hear?

"No! It's not like that Iori!"

Inaba suddenly cried.

What made Inaba say that to Nagase? Something was odd.

But... He could be sure that the phenomenon triggered between Inaba and Nagase.

What sort of words did Inaba leak to Nagase? And what sort of sentiment was it?

Knowing what should not be known, and others finding out what should not be found out.

With no way to adjust your tone, along with your raw feelings, it would mercilessly pierce through others.

A look of despair emerged on Nagase's face.

The mood of the scene froze, one may even argue that the dilemma brought by Gotou was a blessing when compared to this.

Then, from this moment onwards—— Nagase Iori slowly began to break.

□■□■□

Taichi headed to his room on the second floor at home.

As he climbed up the stairs, his fifth-grader sister came out of her room. Her soft curly hair shook slightly.

"Onii-chan~ How did it go? Did you receive any choco... late..."

His sister slowly retracted her innocent voice and blinked in surprise.

"Are—Are you okay, Onii-chan? You are looking extremely gloomy! Onii-chan isn't the type without any luck with ladies right? I'd expect you to receive at least giri-choco... D—Don't tell me you didn't receive any..."

"If you're talking about giri-choco, then yes, I've received a few."

"Oh~ Then isn't that good? Ah, I know, Onii-chan didn't receive from you truly like did you~? And then you saw her gave her honmei-choco to someone else~"

"...Excuse me, I'm gonna head to my room now."

Taichi said to his sister, and took a step.

"Wai—Wait, Onii-chan! Se—Seriously, are you alright? Are you feeling ill?"

"No, it's not that."

Taichi believed it would be fine.

He kept telling himself, it would definitely be fine.

"If you have anything troubling you, I can help, you know!"

Taichi was very happy to have his sister, who was usually reliant on him, say that to him.

"Thank you... But... I'm fine."

He shook off his sister's grip on his sleeve.

He could not get his sister involved with that abnormal world, even if she couldn't enter it to begin with.

"B—But you don't look fine at all! Here, take this! My chocolate! Please cheer up, okay?"

Taichi received a small, pink paper wrapper.

"Oh... Sorry."

"B—By the way, this... this is my honmei-choco."

His sister lowered her head slightly, cutely playing around with her fingers.

"Okay then... I'll see you at dinner."

Taichi turned his doorknob.

"Eh? Strange. I thought Onii-chan would be happy that I say that, how come you're not responding at all? Wouldn't that make my effort in vain? You have to return the favour like usual, by five times! And our teacher gave us really difficult homework, you gotta help me out! Hey, Onii-chan, are you listening? Listen to me~~"

*Please don't let anything bad happen.*

*Please let them make it through together.*

Taichi prayed. Yet, under «Heartseed»'s phenomenon, there was no hope to achieve such a foolish dream.

## Chapter 2 - The Valentine's Day for Inaba Himeko

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For the Cultural Research Club, as well as Inaba Himeko, this was their fourth paranormal encounter.

«Number Two» did not intervene this time, as if to say that this was a formal deal. «Heartseed» possessed Gotou Ryuuzen, homeroom teacher of class 1C plus advisor of the CRC, and appeared in the club room.

Due to the special occasion of the third occurrence, Inaba deduced that he may show up through other methods, but that assumption amounted to nothing.

*In the end, what's the deal with «Number Two»?*

It is worth noting that, Inaba tried to inquire about it, but «Heartseed» merely answered with: "Ahh... About that... That one was curious about me... In other words, I was interesting to that one... In other words, I've become interesting... Ahh, why do I need to answer these... Do I? Or do I not?" sort of garbage.

«Heartseed»'s gimmick for this round was "Sentiment Transmission."

Simply put, this phenomenon transmits one's sentiment to specific targets among themselves without the need of speaking or limitation by distances.

Once this phenomenon triggered, they could hear the inner thoughts, as well as feel the 'feelings' of one another. Also, they would be able to automatically tell whose thoughts or feelings they had received based on the voice and impression.

How were they able to tell? It was difficult to describe in words. Even though they could hear the voice, they didn't hear it through their ears. It was more like a voice that echoed clearly in their heads.

The same went for 'feelings' as well. They could only feel it. If they really had to describe it, it would be something like over synchronising to the point where their feelings are completely shared— That was probably the closest they could put it.

The targets were, of course, the five members of the CRC. The time of triggering was random. Based on experience, however, they suspected that some occasions were triggered deliberately.

There were a few other factors.

First of all, the number of people receiving your thoughts and feelings was random. It may be one, or it may be multiple.

Next, the one whose sentiment was exposed would be able to know 'who' received the transmission. On the other hand, the receiver would not know who else received the transmission.

Putting those factors together, to draw an analogy, it would be something like this: Among the five of them, one of them would occasionally act as a 'radio tower' and send out a 'transmission signal.' The ones who 'matched the frequency of that signal' among the remaining others would then receive the transmission, and then the sender would know who those receivers were.

It was worth noting that, the stronger the sentiment, the more likely it would be transmitted. And the closer a certain person was related to the sentiment, the more likely that person would become a receiver. Also, it would seem that if they actually wished to have their sentiment transmitted, the likelihood of the transmission triggering would increase as well, but that was only a wild guess, so there would be no harm to ignore it.

This was what they got after reorganising «Heartseed»'s words.

When the phenomenon first triggered, they would feel this strong abrupt feeling. They would occasionally feel disgusted, or painful in the head. After all, their minds were being intruded by somebody else's thoughts and feelings.

They got used to it after a week though, in that they no longer felt any physical discomfort.

Objectively speaking, getting used to the phenomenon this quickly was, of course, abnormal. But considering that they had already gotten used to the aspect of 'getting used to the phenomenon'... Although very frustrating, they couldn't help it.

Just as before, this was a terrible phenomenon.

Having your inner thoughts exposed like that... That alone was enough to drive anyone insane.

During the first three days, Inaba Himeko was very conscious of her own comparatively deceitful and insidious thoughts. Therefore, she tried to convince herself: *Once I fall asleep, I'll stop thinking, then it wouldn't be a problem...* Though she soon got herself stuck in a 'the more she tried to sleep, the more she couldn't' kind of negative loop in the end.

However, they were no longer beginners.

They had already built a formidable bond between themselves, and had revealed many personal secrets to each other.

By the fourth day, Inaba's fatigue was beginning to reach its peak. But after Taichi comforted her that "It will be alright," she was finally able to close her eyes for some much needed sleep. After relieving herself like that, she felt much more at ease, and was able to return to her normal life.

Thereafter, with reaching the 'end' in mind, they move forward. They accepted their current state and continued living their lives.

Those beings wanted to see something interesting.

This was why the phenomena were being triggered where Inaba and the others belong, in the Cultural Research Club.

Looking from a different angle, since that was the case, if Inaba and the others stopped showing them anything 'interesting,' those beings would lose interest on the CRC, would they not?

In other words, suppose a phenomenon began, but they were not affected the slightest and maintained their normal lives. «Heartseed» and others alike would then believe that "These guys don't do anything interesting anymore."

Thinking back, during the 'Desire Unleash' phenomenon, «Heartseed»'s reason for ending the phenomenon was "Everybody had gotten used to it."

Based on these assumptions, Inaba and the others decided to take on this countermeasure: Disregard the phenomenon and live their lives as usual.

This was several days ago.

Let's do this. We'll show them. All good? Fight! —— They had sworn to themselves.

Yet, the 'worst case scenario' seemed inevitable.

They thought they were going to make it through together. Such a dream, however, was soon shattered.

Conflict arose due to 'Sentiment Transmission' during their club activity the other day.

Iori, who had not spoken a word since then, seemed to be hurt to most.

And Inaba herself was forced to find out that certain truth... and hear those words...

The road forward was grim.

What plagued her mind even more were the words that dratted «Heartseed» said: "Ahh... I suppose I should be more enthusiastic this time... Should I... Or should I not..."

□■□■□

Fifteenth of February, the day after Valentine's Day.

That morning, Inaba quietly slipped the chocolate into her bag, and headed out for school.

Inaba did not head directly to the classroom: She couldn't bring herself to face Taichi or Iori. Instead, she walked to a desolate corner of the school building. She figured that she should be contemplating on how to deal with the issue of Gotou's club advising arrangement, but decided to put it aside for now.

"...I'm probably the only one who's still bringing chocolate to school today."

Luckily, she didn't use any ingredients with a short storage life like fresh cream or fresh fruit etc., she only prepared plain chocolate..., Inaba thought to herself. Truth was that she tried to challenge advanced level sweets, which ended in complete failure. To her, it was what they would call a girl's secret.

This was the first time she had ever cooked for someone else.

Inaba opened her bag and checked the box containing the chocolate... The first hand-made, hand-packaged Valentine's Day chocolate in her life.

Seeing it, she deeply understood that she was rejected.

Regret, sadness, loneliness, and many other kinds of feelings flowed within her; tears began to fill her eyes.

*Stop. If I cry now, I'll look even more pitiful.*

She wasn't sure of the details. However, the truth remained, Yaegashi Taichi chose not her, but Nagase Iori.

His choice... No. It had already been decided since the beginning.

She had already lost to begin with, yet she shamelessly proclaimed that she had not lost the war, and pampered her petulant self. This is where she ended up.

Her resistance was futile. Taichi had once again confessed to Iori. That was the decisive outcome.

...That was how it was supposed to end.

Iori, however, rejected Taichi's confession. Things had become chaotic.

The chocolate too. She originally wanted to throw it out but couldn't bring herself to do it, so she continued to keep it in her bag.

Was she looking forward for something particular? Something like opportunity?

Based on what she knew, Iori was supposed to have feelings for Taichi.

"Could it be something like... she doesn't love him anymore...?"

Did something happen that influenced their relationship?

If that was the case, how should she perceive it? Or, what course of action should she take?

She did not know.

She would be wanting to ask Taichi out.

But hearing the conflict between Taichi and Iori disturbed her.

If Inaba only considered the situation between Taichi and herself—

*[ Having Taichi and Iori's relationship worsen is an advantage for me, is it not? ]*

'Sentiment Transmission' triggered.

"...C'mon! Why did it have to pick only that part for 'Sentiment Transmission'!?"

That sentiment was forwarded to Taichi and Iori. She had better explain it to them afterwards.

"With that thought alone, I've become a despicable woman..."

Now that she thought about it, the things that Iori said the day before, along with the cold thoughts in her mind, may have been something like this... No, this was only wishful thinking.

*...I'm pathetic. My cowardly bug is spewing nonsense again.*

A dark, heavy feeling began to stir in her chest—*CLAP!* Inaba inflicted pain on herself by clapping her hands together as hard as she could, and interrupted her own thoughts.

Even though they were experiencing such a phenomenon, thankfully, it did not seem to be affecting the environment outside of the CRC. Since that was the case, they would only need to endure it. Of course, as companions, they would need to support each other.

*Alright, let's resolve this before it gets any worse! Start by talking with each of them directly.*

"Good!" Inaba pulled herself together, prepared to head to her classroom—And found herself meeting with someone's eyes.

"...Ah, my apologies, Inaba-san. Morning exercise. I was taking a shortcut..."

Shiroyama Shotou, her classmate from class 1C, whom she spoke with yesterday and who was part of the Jazz Band, was standing there on this normally desolate grounds of the school.

...Figuring that he must have seen her talking to herself, Inaba felt extremely embarrassed.

"Er—Erm, you must be rehearsing... I will see you in class."

Shiroyama was a nice fellow, though his gentle words stirred a painful feeling in Inaba's chest.

—The fate of the chocolate was yet to be determined.

Noon break, Inaba approached Iori in a desolate hallway.

"I've already explained it to Yui and Aoki. They both expressed that 'they're not the ones to comment,' something like that."

As Inaba finished, Iori replied "I see" and nodded. Iori's expression was grim. She had been like that since the beginning of class in the morning.

"Anyway, back on the matter—"

Inaba was caught speechless for a moment.

Iori's cold gaze pierced through Inaba.

*Don't look at me with a scary expression like that please.*

Inaba could almost feel her weak heart being mercilessly crushed.

But then, she took a deep breath, and spoke:

"Is it true that Taichi confessed to you? And that you rejected him, is that also true?"

"...Mhm."

"What happened?"

"Nothing particular. He confessed to me, but I rejected him... That's all."

"But you..."

*"That's all"?* Doesn't that sound a little too nonchalant? Inaba couldn't help but feel a little agitated.

"What was the point of the triangle relationship between me, you and Taichi before then!? Did something happen and make you not like him anymore!?"

She lost her composure again. Not good.

"...Say I tell you, what are you gonna do?"

Inaba struggled to control her anger, and was soon greeted by Iori with a splash of cold water.

Her attitude was calm... and cold.

"But, I can't accept..."

"Accept what?"

Her face was like an expressionless mask.

A breath-taking, beautiful mask.

Beautiful... and appalling.

"I'm sorry, Inaban. I don't know why myself. But it is true that I 'no longer want to go out with Taichi.'"

As if explaining gently.

"Therefore, you don't need to worry about me."

*Don't need to worry about her—she said. Then what am I going to do?*

"Uh, was it... was it something to do with the 'Sentiment Transmission' phenomenon?"

"...I'd be lying if I say it wasn't."

"Th—Then, why don't you reconsider? I mean, we are under abnormal circumstances, which causes us to make false judgements, once everything goes back to normal—"

"I've thought of that as well," Lori spoke, interrupting Inaba.

"When will that time ever come though? Say the current phenomenon ended, but what if another one hits us again?"

She did not know.

"People change according to their environment anyway, right? What's the difference between «Heartseed»'s phenomena and other external factors?"

She did not know.

"Not to mention, the reason why the 'story' between me and Taichi was even started, was because of 'Personality Exchange' wasn't it? Then, wouldn't that be false judgement as well?"

She did not know.

"I should ask though, Inaban, is it your wish for me to go out with Taichi? What is it that you really want?"

That—was the very thing that she wanted to know most.



And, was Lori the kind of girl who would talk about her relationship in such an impassive manner?

Was she the type that would display, with no consideration of others' feelings as if wanting to drive them into despair, such a cold, chilling demeanour?

'Sentiment Transmission' triggered again.

Inaba heard Taichi's thought.

*[ What should I do... Nagase told me such... And Inaba... And I didn't even do my homework... ]*

Taichi's tangled feelings dawned upon Inaba.

Even though she knew Taichi could not hear her, Inaba replied deep within her heart.

—*How should I know.*

In the end, Inaba was unable to find out how Lori truly thinks.

The only thing she could be sure of, however, was that Lori no longer wanted to go out with Taichi.

...And it felt a little frightening.

During the seldom-extended homeroom meeting, Inaba pondered absently.

"Compared to that... I..."

Inaba muttered to herself at a volume that no one else could hear.

Rather than worrying about the others, she thought, she should probably worry about herself right now.

Even if she treated Lori's issue as an excuse to avoid her own problem, nothing would be resolved.

She had been rejected once to begin with, and then she was rejected in the form where 'he didn't choose her, but her rival' once again. What should she do now?

*Normally, I would have given up, Inaba thought to herself.*  
However, the reason why she was rejected was gone.  
In that case, what should she do now?  
No matter how hard she searched through her database, she couldn't find an answer.  
She wished someone could give her the right answer.  
She did not understand what it meant to be in love.  
She did not understand what it meant to love another person.  
She did not understand anything.  
Her feelings became tangled.  
Was she going to start having one of those contemptible thoughts again like she did in the morning?  
She didn't want others to feel her confused thoughts.  
She believed herself to be despicable, insidious, and cowardly. More so than anyone else.

*Why don't I just stop thinking... It'll be easier like that, but I can't do that... And besides, is it really alright for me to be so indulgent in love? I mean think about the phenomenon... It's best to ignore it, isn't it? But then I'd completely end up on the receiving end of the stick... and become influenced, and then shaken... and eventually driven to a dead end... And if the others find out how pathetic I am... No! This is embarrassing, embarrassing, embarrassing... I won't be able to put myself back together again—— I can't take this anymore.*

*No more, Inaba thought to herself. She wanted to give up; she wanted to leave everything behind, and escape from the pain.*

*She was not fit for love after all.*

*The chocolate, I should just throw it out, therefore——*

[ *I'm sorry. I missed my chance yesterday, so I'm a day late... ]*

Yui's inner voice rang in Inaba's mind.

And then, Aoki's voice—

[ *YEEEEESSSSHHHHHHH! I thought I weren't getting any this year, I'M SO HAPPYYYYYYYY-----!* ]

"Uch..."

Inaba closed her eyes and covered her ears reflexively.

"What's wrong?" The girl behind her asked. Inaba replied, "It's nothing."

She almost felt her heart jump out from that scare.

Aoki's thought came to her at an incredible volume.

They were doing pretty well despite the situation, Inaba remarked in her mind. Indeed, it was the best approach to the situation. Not wavering towards anything, and the end will eventually arrive.

The sentiment did not end there.

Her heart continued to pound uncontrollably.

*Good grief, can they be any more excited?*

Not only that.

The heartbeats that continued to flow into Inaba were —— Yui and Aoki's —— feelings of love.

Love... There was no question about Aoki's, but what about Yui's?

*Jeez, Inaba relaxed her expression and smiled.*

It was a heartbeat that would make anyone blush.

Knowing that her thoughts were heard, how embarrassed would Yui be? (Aoki probably wouldn't mind in the slightest.)

It was—

Really youthful.

Really passionate.

Really... enviable.

Envious of what? Inaba asked herself. Envious of being loved? Well, that could be it.

But at the same time... Envious of being able to love a person.

She did not want to give up.

She did not give up.

She too, this feeling—

*Ahh, what's this?*

*The answer... was right there all along.*

After the meeting, Inaba quickly sent a text message to Taichi.

*"Before heading to the club room, please meet me behind the east school building."*

Without confirming whether Taichi received it, Inaba dashed out of the classroom and arrived at behind the east school building.

This area was usually desolated and was thus a popular spot for love confessions. It was probably crowded yesterday, but today it appeared fairly deserted.

Taichi arrived shortly after.

"Inaba."

Upon being called, she realised she had not talked to Taichi today at all.

Not since that terrible mess yesterday.

*"...I'm sorry about yesterday, for saying... things like 'what about my feelings' and the sort."*

She believed herself to be the selfish, irresponsible one.

"Inaba, there's no need for you to apologise, it's all my fault to begin with..."

*"Don't take all the blame, I was the... Uh, I guess we both share half the blame."*

Inaba smiled and spoke in a seemingly joking manner.

She tried to maintain a cheerful tone and continued:

*"It still surprised me though. I was all prepared the one day Taichi would confess to Lori and ask her out... But I figured if it was you... you would have told me before then."*

*It would definitely be better than finding out through 'Sentiment Transmission,'* Inaba whispered in her mind.

"I—I was originally going to after confessing to Nagase, believing that I get an OK from her, then talk to Inaba afterwards..."

"...What am I, Iori's parent?"

[ *Truth is, I was worried that if I talked to Inaba first, you might have actually kept me and I wouldn't have been able to resist...* ]

"...Hm?"

"In—Inaba... you heard it all?"

"Y—Yeah."

Taichi's thought just now, in other words...

"...Tee~ Hee~"

Inaba gave off a grin.

"Could it be that... you were actually wavering?"

She thought she had lost completely, but surprisingly, it did not seem to be the case.

Her advances had worked.

However, a blushed Taichi tried to deny it.

"I—I was not!"

"...You weren't?"

She tried saying that with a dejected expression.

"Uh, I mean, I don't mean I wasn't...!"

*...Interesting. This guy really is fun to tease after all.*

"Kukuku~" Inaba snickered, to which Taichi protested "You were tricking me weren't you," which made Inaba laugh again.

"Ahem"

Taichi cleared his throat, trying to pull the conversation back to a more serious topic.

"I'm not sure how to put this," he spoke with a serious expression, to which Inaba listened quietly.

"I've always liked Nagase... But that doesn't mean I don't like Inaba. You won't find such a great person anywhere else, that's how I see it."

A great person that you 'won't find anywhere else'?

'Won't find anywhere else'... Did that mean the Only One? Could it be No.1?

"And besides, Inaba is clever, and always there to help others, and selflessly kind, and caring, and mature, and pretty, and very cute sometimes. Even though you're not great at sports or cooking, these things are made up by—"

"Hold... Hold on a sec!"

Inaba cut Taichi short.

She couldn't stop giggling.

*Does this mean... I had him nailed since the beginning?*

*Interesting*, Inaba thought. Since she got rejected anyway, did that mean Iori was way beyond all this? She would love to hear his comments on Iori now.

"Anyway... That's how it is. I think Inaba is very attractive too. But since I can only choose one..."

"...Hey, never mind that for now, what's the part after when you said 'these things are made up by'?"

*Why are you jumping to conclusions already, dummy.*

"Eh, I've said quite enough already. No thanks."

"C'mon~! Tell me~~"

"Eh?"

"Ahh...! N—Nothing! Forget it! I bit my tongue!"

*Wha—Wha—What's with that cutesy sound I made!*

*What's with those arms swinging around like that!?*

These were her own actions, but Inaba couldn't help but to feel a chill through her body.

This time, it was Inaba who cleared her throat and continued:

"I know very well that you're being honest. I know. You've never dragged on. You've never two-timed. You've given a straight answer. That's very handsome of you... The problem stems from me. Thank you."

"No. I should be the one thanking you."

While Inaba did not know what he was thanking her for, Taichi put on a lively expression.

"This was where I confessed to you right?"

It was only three months ago, but it felt like a long time ago to her.

"...Yeah."

"And we kissed too."

"...! Don't say that out loud!"

Taichi blushed.

*Aha~ He really is worth the teasing,* Inaba thought.

Yet, should anything ever happen, he would always be there to rely on.

She smiled. She had fallen in love with him after all.

"Hey. Kiss again?"

She wanted to see his reaction, so she tried asking that.

"(Choke)——!?"

As expected, it caught Taichi completely off guard.

She really enjoyed this reaction pattern of his.

"Let's put the jokes aside for now..... Here."

Inaba took out the box from her bag and handed it to Taichi.

She was surprised at how smoothly she did it.

"Eh, ahh. Th—Thank you."

"As expected you do prefer Iori more, and you made up your mind, yet you still got rejected. Any chance that you'd go out with me now?"

"I can't... that would be a terrible action..."

Was she being too insidious? Inaba wondered. Though she believed there was still room to discuss whether such an action would be a terrible or not.

"I don't know either, what should I do? Ever since I heard Iori rejected you, Taichi, my feelings are itching. My rival is gone now, do I still want to go out with you even though you didn't choose me? I have no clue. Everything. It's all unknown to me."

So many 'unknowns' were before her.

Not to mention, she could not tell whether if this feeling was a result of «Heartseed»'s influence.

But even in face of so many 'unknowns'—

"However, I know one thing for sure, and that is I love you; hence, I give you this. Happy Valentine's Day... Even though it's a day late."

This present feeling of 'love', was without a doubt, a real feeling.

And then, as one who loved Taichi, this was the only thing that needed to be done.

Taichi responded with a sure nod.

"Thank you. Please look forward to White Day."<sup>[2]</sup>

"Of course. Looking forward to it."

Cherishingly, Taichi put Inaba's chocolate in his bag.

With that, she had completed one of her objectives.

*Just wait and see, «Heartseed»*, Inaba declared in her heart.

This was how they choose to fight.

No matter how many times they would fail, they would not give up. They would continue to strive forward.

Just as the two prepared to head to the club room, a thought came to Inaba:

"You've been rejected, and I've been rejected in a sense as well... Having the two of us starting over as rejected companions together, don't you think it's interesting?"

Feeling a little embarrassed of what she said, Inaba took step without looking at Taichi's expression.

"—I'VE BEEN REJECTED!"

Taichi suddenly cried out. It was so sudden, Inaba thought it was 'Sentiment Transmission' for a moment.

"Wha— What the? What's wrong?"

"REJECTED! REJECTED! REJECTED———!"

He tightened his fist, as if trying to shake the earth, he continued to shout from the bottom of his lungs. Even though this place was desolated, there were people in the buildings. Inaba hoped they didn't hear it.

"ALRIGHT———!"

Taichi shouted one last time towards the ground, and ended it there.

...Inaba felt a bit flustered.

Needless to say, her 'love' for Taichi wouldn't be shaken by something trivial like this... Wait, what was she thinking!?

Truth to be told, however, it was kind of disturbing.

"What... on earth are you doing?"

"Oh, it was nothing. I thought it might clear my mind a little, so I tried yelling."

"Since when were you the type of person who does that?"

"Well, I can't just keep holding on to it. If I had accepted reality and acted sooner, Inaba, you wouldn't need to suffer."

"...For me, it would probably be better if you continue to stress over it. If you gave a swift answer..."

*...Then it would have been a swift THE END for me.*

"I thought I had already acknowledged the fact that I've been rejected... But it wasn't the case at all. I was just feeling depressed and all. I know it would never work out like that. I gotta face it, accept it, think about it, and then move forward... Even though I have no idea what direction I'm moving forward towards."

Taichi scratched his head and laughed.

*Hmph, as expected from the guy chosen by Inaba Himeko*— Inaba couldn't bring herself to say such an embarrassing line, so she whispered it in her heart. She wished these embarrassing yet truthful feelings were transmitted with 'Sentiment Transmission'.

"You've changed, Taichi."

A truthful thought.

"You too, Inaba."

"I guess. A lot had happened that made us change."

"Nagase... had she changed like that as well?"

Taichi said with a trace of loneliness on his face.

Suddenly, a voice filled Inaba's mind.

[ *You must think I'm a liar right? You must think I'm a liar right? You must think I'm a liar right?* ]

Thoughts that flowed from Nagase Iori.

It was so cold and chilling that Inaba thought her own heart would be frozen by it.

—Inaba had been thinking for some time:

She thought she understood her well—but could it be that she had never understood Nagase Iori's true nature?

Had she confused a certain key factor with something?

Inaba had this feeling.

*Who is Nagase Iori really?* She asked herself.

### Chapter 3 - The Battle Method of Aoki Yoshifumi

*[ Is the person I am on the surface real?*

*Or is the person I am on the inside the one?*

*Which one is it!?*

*I can't keep up with my perfect display any more. I can't do it. I've already reached my limit.*

*The answer to which is real doesn't even exist to begin with.*

*I have only one path left to take. ]*

□■□■□

Aoki Yoshifumi suddenly awoke and peered around.

Morning. On his bed. In his room, like usual.

"...A dream? But... it didn't feel like one..."

He thought he had been looking at someone's 'sentiment' just then... or had he?

And it seemed to be one from Nagase Iori.

He couldn't remember it clearly, but that sentiment, or the lingering shreds of it, remained heavy in his chest.

"Could it be... 'Sentiment Transmission'?"

It felt different than usual. This might be something that happens while asleep—Aoki deduced on his own.

Even though «Heartseed» had given them detailed explanations, they had long learned their lesson not to trust him word for word.

...To think that he was pondering about 'Sentiment Transmission' so casually made him feel disgusted. «Heartseed»'s phenomena had pretty much become part of his life... he cringed at the thought of that. But he decided to put that aside for now.

Should he talk with the others about Iori's issue? She seemed to be driving herself into a wall over something. But there was a chance that he was the

only one who received that transmission, and revealing somebody else's feelings to others like that might make the situation worse.

"What should I do then...? But, lori-chan did seem a bit off yesterday."

"Screw phenomena, we'll just ignore it!" That was their decision since the start, but things certainly wouldn't go their way that smoothly.

Somebody was bound to get hurt.

Even Aoki himself, whom people believed to have nothing to hide (he too believed that this was his selling point,) would occasionally worry about his thoughts being heard without warning. There were things that he would keep to himself according to situations; and then there were nasty things due to anger, or dirty things.

However, he would work with others together and overcome this phenomenon. This had been his resolution.

In this scenario, he would simply do what he does best.

In other words, he would work hard to maintain his 'usual self.'

He would move onwards at full force.

*Let's fight for the best today! Especially for the club presentation, gotta bring my best! And the finals... Ack, I'd love not to think about those.*

[ *Hmm~ should I have another bowl? Ever since returning to the dojo, I've been getting hungry a lot. But I've already taken half of Anzu's side dish... Hmm~ ...Go for it!* ]

*High in spirits from the morning as usual today, Yui.*

□■□■□

"Oh, I'm the last... No wait, Nagase hasn't come yet?"

Yaegashi Taichi entered the club room.

That made lori the only one who had not arrived yet.

Kiryama Yui had to go to the dojo yesterday, Taichi, Inaba and Iori had to be late as well. But all five of them were expected to be here without problem today.

"Oh right, Kiryama, thanks for your gift yesterday. It tasted great."

"Mhm, you're welcome."

Taichi brought up the landmine topic from two days ago; it seemed to be taken care of. Aoki figured he could relax a little now.

"Ah, so Yui did give Taichi one as well. Was it a chocolate piece like the ones you gave to the boys in class? I haven't tried it since mine was different~"

Believing his own to be the 'honmei chocolate', Aoki asked with a sense of superiority.

"Chocolate piece? Wasn't it like a cake piece?"

"Wa—Wait Taichi!"

Yui panicked and peeked towards Aoki.

"Eh? Cake piece? Wasn't it the same as mine then...?"

"It—It was giri! Obligatory! It barely counts as obligatory!" [\[3\]](#)

"B—Barely counts?"

*So it was something similar to obligatory but not quite obligatory... No, it had to be obligatory! Even if it barely counted as obligatory, it was still obligatory! Hmm? But Taichi got the same thing as I did... Did that mean mine was obligatory too!? Nooooo!*

"I—I thought it was honmei..."

Aoki wondered if he had jumped to conclusions too soon.

"Y—Yours had..."

Yui waved her hands nervously, her face blushing.

"...an extra strawberry on top."

"Yes—! I won by an extra strawberry! I won!"

Considering his opponent was Taichi, it was a huge difference. Aoki decided to embrace it as a major victory.

"It's just a single strawber... Er, never mind."

Taichi wanted to say something, but stopped short.

*Stop looking at me with that sympathising expression already.*

Truth be told, Aoki knew that single strawberry was probably just added on a whim.

...No, he was pretty sure it was!

"By the way, from my standpoint, I can't pretend I didn't see this you know."

Inaba Himeko stared at Yui with her eyes narrowed.

"W—Why?"

"To be honest I have zero concern about whether Aoki dies from utter despair or not——"

"You don't have to emphasise it that way, Inaba-chan!"

*Please show a little more concern about Aoki Yoshifumi-kun!*

"—But if the one you gave Taichi was specially made..."

"I—It was only because I was always indebted to Taichi and Aoki for their help, so I spent a little more time on theirs. That's it, I swear!"

"Reeeeeally?"

"Yes really! It's not because I li—like Taichi or anything! Ah, I like him very much as a friend of course."

"By 'very' you mean..."

"I mean nothing in particular, honest!"

Hearing Yui and Inaba's conversation, Aoki could certainly feel that Inaba's earlier words were no false claims.

"Inaba-chan, you really do like Taichi."

It wasn't a simple liking towards a friend, but rather an affectionate liking towards the one she loved.

Aoki used to think that she only enjoyed teasing Taichi.

"Hmph, you have a problem with that?"

"No, of course not! Captain Inaba!"

*S—So aboveboard!* Aoki felt that his defining trait was threatened. He wondered whether he should firmly proclaim that as his patent speciality.

"...If only you weren't such a dummy. Sigh... I suppose being dumb has its own merits..."

"Hm? Yui, did you say something?"

Aoki did not hear clearly and inquired, but Yui merely said "Nothing."

Inaba spoke:

"Speaking of which, Yui, you gave chocolate to the boys at the dojo too, right?"

"Those were just giri-choco. Hey, you should have already known that through 'Sentiment Transmission.'"

Yui had recovered from her androphobia, Aoki could make such a claim now.

It was something worth rejoicing for.

"Not that I'm questioning your hard work, but I gotta mention it just in case you ended up as a playgirl, you know?"

"Who are you calling a playgirl!?"

Yui stood up and slammed the table.

"This is a very troubling problem for me too you know!?"

*Emergency! Emergency!*

"Oh... Now that you mentioned it, when Kiriyama was practising karate yesterday, she was thinking something like 'That kid's stance was kinda cool,' 'That guy looked kinda handsome from the side' etc..."

"Taichi! Taichi! Taichi stop saying unnecessary things with an innocent expression on your face!"

"That is indeed a very troubling problem for me! Should I start visiting the dojo too!?"

"It's not like that! I was approaching a group of girls and they were having a conversation about 'Which of the boys was more handsome,' so I tried to think of something to join in..."

"In other words, you were eyeing up guys. ...What a whore."

"AM NOT————!"

As Yui was protesting against Inaba's vulgarity, the door swung open.

Nagase Iori arrived at the club room.

All conversations came to a stop, and the room fell silent.

"Well then, wagering on the life and death of CRC... Okay maybe I'm over exaggerating, but anyway, in order to compete for a convenient advisor for our club, let's think about what to present at the presentation event. After all, we didn't really come up with anything useful yesterday."

Headed by Inaba, the group began their discussion.

Everything was as usual up until this point.

However, Iori, who would normally be the most eager one to voice her opinion, remained silent the whole time.

Her face was impassive, expressionless too.

The air felt as though it was being disrupted by a mismatched, disarranged tune.

Aoki did not know how to cope with it.

Who used to be the bright, cheering sun among them was now overcast by black clouds. Darkness shrouded the CRC club room.

However, this was exactly the time for him to take action.

"I got an idea! Why don't we have the girls cosplay and seduce the male teachers and student council members among the judges— Ack!?"

Aoki was kicked mercilessly in the leg.

"I think having you dance naked and score some sympathy points from the judges isn't a half bad idea either."

Yui said and gave Aoki a gentle look, to which he grinned.

...Though if she understood his intention, he wished she had kicked him a little more gently.

"Hmm," Inaba nodded and spoke, "I like your strategic approach regarding 'how to score points from the judges.' In fact, we'll be needing this strategy. Well then, why don't we share the information that we've gathered individually? Taichi, how did yours go?"

"Er, let's start with what I heard from Shiroyama from the Jazz Band. Since they have to finish their performance within the fifteen-minute time limit,

they're currently practising on setting up the equipment in order to optimise their performance."

"Then, suppose we can fully utilize those fifteen minutes for our presentation, wouldn't that be advantageous for us?"

Yui raised a question.

"No, not quite. Due to the overwhelming number of clubs during the event, the presentations pretty much proceed back to back without break. If the presentation or performance dragged on for too long, it may leave a bad taste in the judges' mouth."

Aoki heard this from some of his friends as well.

"Allegedly there was a club that tried to exploit this last year, and compressed their presentation into a five-minute show and said for the remaining time: 'Break time! We'd like to invite everyone to take a breather and use the bathroom before the next club's performance!'... Though they didn't score anything spectacular."

It seemed they would need to put a lot of work into the presentation; the strategies behind it were very deep as well.

"I heard the Jazz Band's plan is to report their activities throughout the year while setting up the equipment, and then proceed to their performance and pack up afterwards. The entire procedure will be completed within thirteen minutes."

"Oh~" Yui seemed impressed.

"I've asked my friend from one of the athletic clubs. She said they usually only spend about three to five minutes to do a quick oral report and end it right there. After all there isn't much an athletic club can do on stage besides reporting some of its accomplishments during competitions and events. On the other hand, culture clubs spend a lot more effort into their presentations."

"Indeed." Inaba replied. "After all, for clubs that don't really have options like participating events, it's difficult to objectively evaluate them based on accomplishments. The deciding factor here would be how well you impress the judges; allegedly you would get a much better treatment that way."

*I see, Aoki thought to himself. So even without Gotou's issue, the presentation event is still very significant for the CRC.*

He proceeded to report his findings:

"Ah, it seems the Art Club does a live drawing performance every year—"

They continued to exchange info, and then began discussing their presentation's content. Taichi was the first to voice his opinion.

"Our primary club activity is publishing the «Cultural Research News», so I think the most suitable plan would be to present an expanded edition of the «Cultural Research News». Its content could consist of what we believe to be the best articles that we've published before."

"This does sound like a straightforward plan, but would we be able to beat the Jazz Band with that?"

As Yui answered, Aoki spoke as well:

"If we don't come up with something that can surpass that kind of performance of theirs, we'll lose Go-san to them."

The situation was tight, but the CRC had someone who could, no matter what crisis they were in, show them the light and lead them to victory: their prized tactician, her name was—

"Needless to say, the judges would consider the genre difference between our club activities. However, there is no denying that the difference in terms of impact is too great. If we only present our articles, the judges would most likely go 'Hmm, okay' and forget about it right away. Hence, we need to come up with something different."

—Inaba Himeko, the vice president of the Cultural Research Club.

"One option for us is, produce something that 'takes time and effort' strictly for the presentation event. If we have a product that was made specially for the event, that alone would leave them with a decent impression. Furthermore, if it was something that takes a considerable amount of effort to make, then those teachers who love old-school sayings like 'The end result is not important, the effort in the process is!' would certainly give us a high score, don't you think? Kekeke~!"

"...If they knew of such devious motive behind that, the teachers would feel very disappointed."

Taichi whispered to himself quietly.

Everyone discussed passionately. Words like "This isn't right!" "That's no good!" sounded through the air. All kinds of proposals were suggested and rejected.

"What about a map with recommended points of interest around the school?"

As they neared the end of discussion, Yui came up with an idea.

"While it isn't what we usually report about, it's still something we would investigate, interview, write and publish as a report. If we treat it as a special edition of «Cultural Research News», then I think it would work nicely."

Taichi said, to which Aoki echoed:

"This kind of report is pretty practical, the teachers and student council members would like it."

Inaba added:

"And if we used extra large paper, and make it into something that would immediately be recognized as hand-crafted work, it seems that we could leave a good impression on the teachers."

The more they thought about it the more they were convinced that this was a great topic for their club presentation. Hence, the CRC decided to create a map with recommended points of interest around the school. They did not set a limit on what they would report about. Dining spots, shops or recreational areas could all be considered, provided those were places that weren't well known to most people. The group decided that they would organise and print all this information on several sheets of paper vellum, and present them in the form of oral report on stage. They had also planned to make booklets for distribution to spectators at the event.

"How are we going to make the map though? Even if we refer to the magazines and tourist maps, there aren't many that write about our town."

Yui pondered with her hands crossed at her chest, to which Inaba responded:

"There should be some local magazines for that. We can try look those up... But that won't be enough, we gotta do first-hand investigation on the fields... Oi, that sounds surprisingly troublesome."

"Don't feel troubled, Inaba. It only means we can create a report of considerable quality, doesn't it?"

"Yes, yes, sounds just like something the hard worker Taichi-kun would say. I'm trying to put our focus on how to efficiently yield the maximum results while using minimum amount of labour."

"But the most important thing is to earn a high score from the judges right?"

"...Aoki, your point is entirely valid; so valid it's infuriating."

"Don't be infuriated if it's valid then, Inaba-chan!"

Thus, as the CRC slowly approached the end of the class year, this would be their first formal piece of presented work, and not just a casual publishing of everyone's interests. Not to mention, they were betting with the fate of the whole club.

Inaba — who kept grumbling "So much work!" — included, everyone was very enthusiastic about the club presentation.

Aoki wanted to say 'everyone was'... However, Iori barely said a word.

When they asked her for opinions, she would answer 'Ah,' 'Hard to say,' or 'Sounds good' and such, but she showed no sign of actively engaging in the discussion.

Something was obviously off with Iori.

After the group had decided on their respective tasks...

"Um, Iori..."

Visibly concerned, Inaba tried to converse with Iori. Now that Aoki thought of it, the fact that Inaba didn't call out on Iori's attitude this whole time was suspicious. Normally she would be the first to inquire.

Why was that? Did Inaba, like him, know about Iori's heavy, dark and seemingly untouchable inner world?

"...Seriously, is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong."

"But you're reacting so differently."

"Does it always have to be the same?"

[ *This is certainly the trickiest part.* ]

Iori's inner voice came to Aoki, as well as her feelings.

A broiling, black sentiment.

*Did anybody else receive it?*

[ *'Nagase Iori' is all but an act, hence—* ]

Aoki peeked at the other three.

*Did nobody else hear it?*

[ *It's not like this. I can't do it. Can't do it. Hurry hurry hurry!* ]

Hot. Melting. Hot. Hot. Melting hot. Confounding. Incomprehensible feelings. Like lava. Flowed into Aoki.

He thought he had already gotten used to it, but it felt disturbing nonetheless. It was a powerful, yet disparate feeling.

"I—Iori-chan...?"

Gingerly, Aoki tried to talk to Iori, but she threw him an assertive look and shook her head.

"Don't mind it."

*As in 'Not a word'?*

"Anyway, we're done here right? In that case... I'll be off."

Iori picked up her bag and proceeded to leave.

*This isn't like her. This isn't like Nagase Iori at all.*

"Wait, Iori-chan!"

Before Aoki realised it, he had already shouted out, but he had not thought of what to say. Not good.

What should he do?

Something that he should do.

Something that he could do.

His method.

"Iori-chan~ Why have you become the cool beauty all of the sudden~?"

Aoki, maintaining his relaxed demeanour as best as he could, grinned and said to her.

This would be his method.

"Is it to arouse the 'cool girl' image that is not being currently fulfilled by Inaba-chan?"

How would she respond? No matter what response she gave, Aoki would take her on.

*Come now. Come right ahead. She'd respond right? Don't be shy! Hey aren't we waiting a bit too long? Why is everyone so quiet? Hey the mood is getting cold here isn't it? Tell me I'm not completely derailed now am I?*

Iori did not give a single look at Aoki, and left the club room.

□■□■□

Aoki walked towards his home along the river on the road.

The sun had already set, only street lamps remained to illuminate the road.

He looked towards the river. The water appeared black like a bottomless pit.

"Sigh..."

Aoki dropped his shoulders dejectedly, even though he knew he shouldn't be sighing.

"Sigh..."

Yet, he couldn't help but to sigh again.

Before then, no matter what baffling phenomenon he faced, he would maintain a common heart.

He had always believed that, in order for others to feel normal, this would be his best course of action.

However, today he found himself completely powerless.

He saw the fragments of Lori's heart, yet he could do nothing to help.

*I can't solve anything at all can I?*

There was nothing he could do.

A figure approached from the front. This was usually a desolate road, so Aoki looked towards the figure.

"...Hm? Isn't that..."

No wonder it looked familiar, wasn't that the club advisor of Cultural Research Club, Gotou Ryuuzen?

"Oi, what are you doing out here Go-sa—"

Gotou's eyes were half-opened.

Lifeless

Emotionless.

For those who did not know, they would probably think Gotou looked incredibly tired.

But Aoki knew better. He had seen that face many times.

«Heartseed» was possessing Gotou.

*Hold on. Why? What's going on?*

"Good evening... Aoki-san... Ahhh, I don't get to call you Aoki-san very often do I..."

His tone was sluggish and flat as usual. The fact that he behaved with such a haughty demeanour, by which he fully expected the others to know who he was without the need of him announcing himself, annoyed Aoki.

*But, why?*

"Why me?"

He had heard that «Heartseed» may sometimes appear to them when they were alone, but Aoki had not had such an encounter before.

"Hm... I did say I was going to intervene more enthusiastically... You may pretend that I'm just being greedy... Though it doesn't really matter."

*Of course it matters.*

"...Then, what business do you have with me?"

Aoki stared at him sharply and asked with a low tone.

He was unsure of how to deal with him, as it was usually the others who confronted «Heartseed».

He used to think he would be in the way, hence he had always kept his distance. If he knew that he would run into situations like this, he could have rehearsed it a little.

*Should I run? Or contact the others? Maybe I should take the opportunity to—*

"Aoki-san... what do you think of the phenomenon this time?"

"...How do you expect me to answer?"

"Your honest thoughts would be fine..."

"Utmost disgusting."

"As in... worse than before... Is that what you mean?"

"Every time, utmost disgusting."

"...I see... I suppose so..."

What was the point of this conversation? Did he think it was funny?

"Then, during this utmost disgusting phenomenon... What do you think you can do?"

"...Maintain a common heart."

"Maintain a common heart... Is there any meaning to that? In fact... it simply means you're not doing anything, doesn't it...?"

"No, it means a lot."

It should mean something for everyone—

"Ahh... I didn't put it quite right... Should I say that... You're 'unable to do anything'?"

Unable to do anything.

It felt like a sentence thrown at him from the high grounds.

"You are... the least interesting one."

They, as the objective 'observers', attacked Aoki with such a statement.

*Hold on, what's going on right now?*

Aoki's mind went blank suddenly.

*Huh? How am I able to talk to this guy so casually? That's impossible no?"*

If that entity had wanted, he could easily push him—the human named Aoki Yoshifumi—towards 'death'.

Everything was depended on his mood.

Aoki's sight suddenly broadened.

Darkness. Moonlight. Street lights. The entity standing there, and himself. The sounds of river flowing—a world that comprised of only these and nothing else.

*This is scary isn't it? This can't be happening can it?*

He felt as though he and that other one were the only ones left in the world.

"I'll ask again... What can you do?"

«Heartseed» asked. His—Gotou's eyes fixated on Aoki.

*Cold.* It was a given, standing on the road under the wintry night, of course it would be cold. Aoki felt as if he was turning into a block of ice.

*Cold. Too cold.*

"Aoki-san, who is unable to do anything... What would he do?"

*How am I suppose to know? Do I have to answer you? And besides I'm on my way home, lemme go home already! Lemme go home, I beg you, lemme go home already!*

"You are not needed..."

*I know I know! I know I'm the most stupid, useless one among us! I'm the most incapable—*

[ *I wonder what Aoki's doing now.* ]

'Sentiment Transmission'.

A certain someone's thought and feeling came to Aoki.

Unfortunately, he was unable to feel any passionate thought, or any affectionate feelings.

It was a simple wondering of 'what is he doing.'

He could not tell why she would have such a thought.

Nor what sort of chances that she would come up with such a thought.

But he was certain that Yui——was showing concern for him.

Hadn't he, since the 'Time Regression' phenomenon last time, already made his decision?

...That he would no longer falter in face of these nonsensical phenomena, and would never hurt Yui again?

He had to stand up and protect Yui.

*[ As long as Yui worries about me, I will be able to fight, and I will be able to keep on fighting. I will fight in your stead. ]*

*Oooh, it's 'Sentiment Transmission', perfect timing, and it was transmitted to Yui too. It does seem if the person is involved, the sentiment would be more likely to transmit to them. Though this sentiment was transmitted to Taichi as well... which was unnecessary.*

"So, Aoki-san... What can you do——"

"——Maintain a common heart."

He would no longer falter, and had no need to falter.

It was for the sake of himself.

The sake of Yui.

And of course, the sake of everybody.

It was what he should do, and what he could do.

"Like I said... That's the same as not doing anything... Generally speaking..."

"Now is my time to work hard for the club presentation event!"

*By the way, let's put the finals aside for now!*

"...Ahh... So that's your conclusion... Even though I knew it was coming."

«Heartseed» shook his head in a seemingly helpless manner.

*Helplessness? Had «Heartseed» ever shown such expression before?*

"Ahh... Aoki-san... You are indeed the most boring and uninteresting..."

Boring and uninteresting? Inaba said before, "When «Heartseed» stops finding them interesting, he would end these phenomena." Could this be the key to their situation...

"But, is it exactly because of this... that one could move on? And then..."

Ahh... I should stop talking to myself like this again..."

*Move on? What?*

"Uh... Well then... That settles it. Our conversation ends here, Aoki-san..."

Hmm... That's it."

«Heartseed» said, and proceeded to leave.

"Eh? Oi, you came after me and now you're just leaving on your own like that? Hey!"

Aoki wanted to pursue, but found no meaning in doing so, so he gave it up.

"Say, I was heading that way too~ And now you're walking ahead of me, wouldn't that make it difficult for me to walk that way? Feels like I'm following you~"

Needless to say there was no response. Aoki had no other option, so he stood there and wait.

"Grrr it's so cold! If I catch a cold from—"

[ *Do I truly love Nagase Lori?* ]

'Sentiment Transmission' triggered. It was... Taichi's sentiment?

What was Taichi thinking?

If Lori heard this, what would she think?

"Ah, but Lori had already rejected Taichi..."

*Hm~ So complicated.*

Even so, Aoki could only stay true to his methods.

□■□■□

"Ah, Nagase-san, pardon me, for asking you to come out all of the sudden..."

Stood before me was Shiroyama Shouto, a classmate who belonged to the Jazz Band.

I hadn't conversed with him much before, but we did have a few exchange during CRC's recent visit to the Jazz Band.

"I have... something I'd like to say to you..."

I was able to guess what he wanted to say. I wished he would stop there, however. There was no way I would be able to answer him normally at the moment.

"Erm... Since Nagase-san seem to be quite popular and get along nicely with boys as well, so I thought Nagase-san would have a boyfriend or someone of interest... But I heard you didn't give out any chocolate on Valentine's Day... Hence, I thought you may not have anyone in your mind yet..."

A person in mind... No. Not at all... Not at all...

Even though I thought I liked him before.

"Th—The truth is, I've always... towards Nagase-san..."

"Enough."

I talked over Shiroyama.

Normally, I wouldn't do this. Normally.

"Eh?"

"Take my word, whatever you're about to say, don't say it."

I truly wished him not to.

Shiroyama should go out with someone more ordinary, more normal.

"Eh? Then... You have someone you like... Do you? But I thought I could at least..."

"Please, stop it."

This time it was no longer a warning, but rather a pleading. It was the best option.

"...Why? Do you... hate me that much?"

"I don't hate you."

"Then... Why is... Nagase-san acting so differently than usual?"

'Different than usual.' I was not the usual person I was.

"Nagase-san normally would be... more lively, more cheerful, seemingly happy, embraced by friends, like... the sun..."

Was that the 'Nagase Iori' in Shiroyama's mind?

No, that was the 'Nagase Iori' in everybody's mind.

"I see, Shiroyama-san likes how I am that way, but not how I am right now, am I right?"

"Eh... That..."

"You don't even know the real me, what's there left for us to say?"

I gave the paled Shiroyama a fatal blow.

"I... I..."

It was for the best to reject him coldly like this. This way he wouldn't have to hold on to those false dreams about me.

Though... it might had been too harsh. Did I overdo it? But I had to choose a side. Back then I would have been able to handle this better. But I couldn't help it any more. I could only say in my heart: I'm sorry.

□■□■□

"I heard you had cruelly rejected Shiroyama-san, is it true?"

Setouchi Kaoru from our class stared at me angrily.

"Hey, say something!"

Setouchi flicked her hair upward. I thought she was too neurotic, and was tempted to say "This is none of your concern"... No, I supposed she was concerned. After all Setouchi liked Shiroyama. I had this feeling before, and with this I was even more certain of it.

"Say something already—"

"I rejected him."

It was an undeniable truth. Though if it were the normal me, I wouldn't have displayed such an attitude.

"...How could you say that with such an unconcerned look on your face?"

"Why? Am I suppose to look sad?"

It was a terrible way to answer. I did not have to provoke her. It seemed we were both neurotic after all.

"Aren't you a bit full of yourself right now? To think you've been acting like a good girl all the time."

"Aren't you the one who's full of herself here?"

I really shouldn't have said that. But seeing Setouchi, I couldn't help it. Why?

"What?"

Setouchi was not amused. I could almost see her veins pop.

"Who confessed to me, and who I rejected, are none of your concern, right?"

This argument was entirely valid. But in face of someone in the heat, it really wasn't the best idea to tell her off with such a cold tone, as it would only provoke her further. I was aware of this, yet I still wanted to say it. I couldn't stop. What a fool I was, why did I had to choose such a terrible option?

"You are indeed full of yourself... In fact, you are a terrible person!"

"No matter how we look at it, I think you're the one who's worse here."

"What's the meaning of that!? Were you... Was it all an act before?"

"If that's what you think."

An act— surely, to others, it was most likely that.

"You've been... deceiving others like that! You seduced Shiroyama-san!"

I would really like to object to the 'seduce' part.

"What on earth is with you? Why would people like you... I... too, in fact I..."

"In fact what?"

I inquired, and Setouchi's red face became even redder.

"You are the utmost terrible! Remember this!"

Setouchi left those words and left angrily. I had made an enemy.

Utmost terrible, was I?

Was that the real me?

Like this? Like how? Like that?

All kinds of options were laid before me. If it were normal, if it were me...

Hence, I would-----

## Chapter 4 - The Love Dilemma for Yaegashi Taichi

February was nearing its end. In Yaegashi Taichi's class, class 1C, there had been an apparent decrease in students dozing off in class. One could feel the incoming arrival of the finals.

The club presentation event that followed the finals was imminent as well. The CRC members planned to spread out after school for a field investigation.

[ *Sigh~ It's that day today... ...So tiring~* ]

...It was Inaba's 'Sentiment Transmission.'

There was not a shred of privacy in face of this phenomenon. However, they had already experienced a similar scenario during the 'Personality Exchange' phenomenon. Hence, having a better understanding each other, the CRC members managed to cope with it so far. Taichi, too, found it embarrassing when his personal secrets were exposed; and he found it especially painful when words that should had been kept from others were accidentally leaked to them as well. That being said, he felt he shouldn't allow himself to behave the way he did during the 'Time Regression' phenomenon last time — memories of being powerless and putting his companions in jeopardy continued to pain him. Fight hard, he thought. Everyone must have felt the same way.

The problem, however, lay with Nagase Iori.

"Hey, have you heard? They say Nagase-san she... like that."

"...But Iori... And then... She actually said that..."

Whisperings could be heard everywhere in the class. The person of concern would most likely overhear some of them.

"But from our view Nagase she... and... like this."

"...Yeah, I still find it hard to believe..."

"I'm telling the truth!"

Setouchi Kaoru said in a volume so loud as though she didn't care if she was heard——no, in fact she meant to say it loud so that she would be heard. It would seemed she was the one responsible behind these rumours.

"You've all been deceived. She'd been acting sweet all these time."

Setouchi, with her tough, assertive demeanour, held strong influence in the class.

Combined with the fact that she dyed her hair brown, wore earrings and was always seen hanging out with delinquents from other classes, most students were reluctant to oppose her, which further reinforced Setouchi's influence.

Right now, Setouchi and her companions deemed Nagase Iori as their hated enemy.

Normally speaking, however, no matter how much influence Setouchi may have, she wouldn't have been able to so easily stir up the class like this.

But now...

"Hey... Iori."

Nakayama Mariko, one of Nagase's closer friends, approached her.

"What?"

Nagase replied in an apathetic tone, her expression appeared nonchalant as well.

Nakayama was puzzled.

Nagase showed no intention of explaining herself.

"There are rumours... strange rumours about Iori circulating around the class, but I won't believe them."

She chose an open location to converse; she probably meant to proclaim her stance to the class.

"I don't think Iori is that kind of girl, they must have made it up——"

"Then let them blabber all the want."

Nagase replied flatly, her face remained impassive. Her usual smile was no where to be seen.

"Just ignore them."

Her expression exhibited a powerful aura. One may even find it frightening. It probably wasn't too much of a problem for Taichi, as he had seen the many different faces of Nagase's before. But for those classmates who had only known about Nagase's usual, cheerful side, it was too great of a contrast.

"Um... it's not surprising that you're angry, Iori..."

"I'm not angry, not at all."

Her expression remained the same, her eyes were limpid as ice.

[ *This is good enough. This is good enough. Enough already.* ]

Nagase's inner voice came to Taichi, it was a very grim sentiment.

"Iori... You're kinda scary lately."

"I'm actually quite scary to begin with."

"Uh—" Nakayama winced and appeared at loss.

"Um, alright. In that case... I'll see you later."

"I'm sorry."

Hearing Nagase's apology, Nakayama's expression became puzzled as if saying "This is getting even more confusing now."

The 'Nagase Iori' that everyone was familiar with was no more. The 'Nagase Iori' in front of them at this moment was completely different than the 'Nagase Iori' they once knew.

This was not something that could be explained as a mere bad mood or anger.

Ever since the 'Sentiment Transmission' phenomenon started, Nagase began emitting a deterring air around her. She, who used to be the lovable bringer of cheer, would not even give people a proper look in the face.

*What is Nagase thinking? What's she trying to do?*

[ *Nagase's supposed to be more cheerful and happy right? That's Nagase...* ]

*Crap*— As Taichi exclaimed in his mind, it was already too late. His thoughts were transmitted to Nagase.

At that moment, Nagase's shoulder seemed to jerk slightly.

The preparation for the club presentation event was more strenuous than expected.

Based on what Taichi heard, their rival, namely the Jazz Band, was increasing their practice time. Even Shiroyama from the class appeared exhausted. Clubs that planned to show off during the event were all spending a lot of effort for their preparation.

At this time, the CRC members busied themselves with travelling from place to place in search for recommended points of interest around the school.

Their sources of information were district magazines and gossips among students, and then first-hand investigations based on those.

Like the day before, they gathered in the club room, and then parted towards their assigned locations.

"Oh, Nagase you're heading this way too."

"Mhm."

Coincidentally, Taichi and Nagase's directions were the same before nearing their destination.

Taichi, with his long coat over his uniform, walked with Nagase and exited the school gate, and headed the opposite direction they would take when coming to school.

Taichi had not been alone with Nagase for a long time.

Ever since he was rejected the day before Valentine's Day, Taichi had not conversed with Nagase much.

It was because he needed time to move on, that and the phenomenon... Were these his excuses?

In any case, he thought that this was an opportunity to clear up the awkward air between them.

"Uh, Nagase... Are you alright?"

Others may have already asked her this many times, but Taichi inquired anyway.

"I'm fine."

How many times did Nagase flatly repeat that answer?

"Is there really no way for me to help? I can do anything!"

"No, I'm good."

A strong gust blew against them. The piercing cold air stung on their cheeks. Taichi placed his hand in his coat pocket.

"Um... If you..."

Taichi still found it difficult to bring up and was hesitant for a moment.

"...If you're concerned about rejecting me before, you don't have to worry about me you know."

Nagase compressed her lips.

She seemed to be forcing herself to remain expressionless.

"...I'm sorry."

Hearing her apology, Taichi's heart felt heavy.

However, as a friend of Nagase's, Taichi decided to take a step further.

"But Nagase, you've been really off lately, and I'm not gonna let you deny that either."

Nagase lowered her head without a word.

"You are stressing over something due to the 'Sentiment Transmission' phenomenon, am I right? I know there's a limit to how much I can help. But you should know this already, that you can easily solve many things as long as you let others to help you."

Nagase quivered. She did not seem to be shivering from the cold.

"...About that... Thank you really, but—"

*[ I don't need any help. Please don't delve any further. ]*

Complete rejection.

This was Nagase's 'Sentiment Transmission.'

Along with it were all kinds of feelings mixed together, Taichi was unable to grasp its true form.

"Nagase..."

Taichi whispered her name absently.

Nagase was rejecting Taichi deep within her heart.

Nagase Iori did not need him, not even a fragment of him——Taichi deeply realised that fact.

A clear and naked blow.

As someone who was completely rejected, he was powerless.

"That will be it... I'll be heading off. ...I'm sorry."

Leaving Taichi behind, Nagase walked ahead.

Watching her back figure, Taichi realised once more.

He did not understand Nagase Iori. Not one bit.

*And she's supposed to be the person I love too.*

□■□■□

Taichi's investigation site was a newly opened game centre.

However, even after entering the site, Taichi was too dispirited to do any proper investigation.

Whirring sounds of the machines, loud chatters from people trying to talk over the sound effects... All sounded like nothing but irritating noise in his ears.

He was unable to assimilate into this space; he felt like he was abandoned by the whole world.

*I'm unable to do anything*—— This delusional thought echoed clearly in his mind as though it were real, driving Taichi into a dead end.

Unable to cheer up nor work up any motivation, he saw no point in wasting time here.

*We are going to be dismissed after we've finished our field investigation anyway, I should just call it a day for now.*

Just as Taichi thought that...

[ *Should we dissolve the Cultural Research Club?* ]

Inaba Himeko's inner voice came to Taichi through 'Sentiment Transmission.'

Cold shivers ran down his spine.

Taichi was fully aware that Inaba was seriously considering this idea.

*Why did things end up a joke like this?*

Nagase had rejected him, and if the CRC dissolved as Inaba's thought suggested as well... Where then, would his place to belong be?

In the room with the heater on, Taichi held his coat tight around himself.

An indescribable fear overwhelmed him, so Taichi made a call to Inaba.

After a fair bit of nonsensical blathering, Inaba said to him "Jeez, what a hassle. Get yourself over here." So Taichi headed to the café which Inaba was going to investigate.

"You came, perfect timing. I was about to say it looks a bit too exquisite for me to walk in alone."

The two entered the café together. Indeed, the prices were set higher than average, so there weren't any high-schoolers in sight.

The warm interior was furnished with wooden materials, and had plenty of room between tables. The whole café exhibited a cosy and relaxing atmosphere.

"I see, this does look to be a good spot for couples to date."

Inaba murmured as she took notes.

The two ordered the café's speciality latte, and sat down at a double-seated table.

After taking a few photos with the café workers' permission, Inaba spoke:

"Anyhow, the fact that superfluous thoughts can be leaked as well really is irritating."

"...Sorry."

"I'm not blaming you, it's how this phenomenon works after all."

The two picked up their coffee cups.

The warmth and mildness of the latte seeped into the heart and body.

Taichi felt his mind become a little more at ease.

"Inaba, about what you were thinking earlier... What do you mean by 'dissolve'?"

As Taichi inquired her, Inaba entered a moment of silence. Composed, she continued to drink her coffee with her back straight.

"I've thought about it before, «Heartseed» seems to be interested in the five of us from the CRC, and he also seems to see the five of us as a single unity. Do you agree with this?"

"Yeah, I understand that."

«Heartseed» always claimed that the five members of the CRC were 'interesting,' and that these phenomena had only ever happened on the five of them.

"Since that is the case, if the five of us were no longer together, then he would end the phenomena—— This is entirely possible, am I correct?"

If what «Heartseed» found to be interesting from them was based on the idea of the 'five of them together,' then...

"If the five of us destroy the CRC, and stop interacting with each other... We may be able to return to our normal lives."

Inaba said, and proceeded to add:

"He even complained about it before, that it'd be very troublesome for him to explain things if the five of us weren't all present at the same time."

Her assumption seemed unwarranted, but had in fact struck right at the heart of the matter.

"But—"

"We should sever these chains of dratted phenomena right?"

Inaba questioned, as though trying to shut off Taichi's rebuttal.

Taichi could only nod in agreement.

"Something is wrong with Iori lately."

Hearing Inaba mention Nagase, Taichi felt his heart heavy again. The warmth of the room faded from him.

"It would've been fine if it were only us, but as you've already seen during the day, it's beginning to negatively influence the environment outside the CRC. To those who don't know the truth, we can't possibly tell them 'a phenomenon happened' for an excuse... Not to mention, should anything happen, it would be too late."

"That's why you wanted to dissolve the CRC..."

"Gotou was probably going to resign from his position as our advisor anyway. I figured this might be a good opportunity... Even though I've always resisted that thought."

There had already been several phenomena. Having been implicated every time, what was the right course of action for them?

Suddenly, Taichi realised something. Actually no, should he say he had this weird feeling since the conversation began?

"There's one thing I want to confirm."

Taichi inquired Inaba.

"Is this what Inaba truly wished to do?"

Inaba did not say a word. Her clear, slender eyes under those long eyelashes gazed into Taichi's.

"That suggestion... Who was it for?"

Taichi did not waver, confronting those eyes that would suck him in.

After a brief moment, Inaba averted her eyes and clicked her tongue.

"Yes, yes, you're right. Even in face of this I still want everyone to be together. The whole consideration behind ending the phenomena by dissolving the club was for you guys. You have a problem with that? You jerk. Hmph! Hmph!"

She was being difficult.

"I thought so."

Inaba was too kind-hearted. She would always prioritise everyone before herself. She had been the same as before.

"Since when have you become one of those intuitive characters anyway? Having Taichi read my mind without undergoing 'Sentiment Transmission' like this, I feel insulted."

*Please don't feel insulted*, Taichi protested in his head.

"Of course I understand, I feel the same as Inaba too. No matter what hardship we face, I want to be together with everyone."

An honest feeling.

During his conversation with Inaba, he found this feeling once again.

As Taichi slowly recognised his true feelings, he felt his words become empowered.

"It's all because of the CRC, that I was able to meet everyone, and find all kinds of memories. Not to mention, there are still many more things I wish to do with everyone. Of course, that includes Inaba too."

There was nothing to be hesitant about.

"Hey, can you say 'Of course, that includes Inaba too' again? Like you did just now, with feeling."

"...Of course, that includes Inaba too."

"Ku...!"

Inaba covered her mouth and giggled. What kind of weird request was that?

"Anyway, I believe everyone must feel the same too. Aoki, Kiriyama..."

—*And Nagase...*

Taichi was unable to continue with that, because he did not understand what Nagase truly thought.

Seeing Taichi pause like that, Inaba returned to her serious demeanour.

"But think of it from another angle."

Inaba's lips curled into a faint, mischievous smile.

"You too, agree that we might have the need to dissolve, right? Rationally speaking."

"...Eh?"

Taichi gasped at the question. He was compelled by Inaba's gaze.

"...Honestly, I can't say I never thought of it."

"I thought so. After all, you are the most aware of how much inconvenience we are causing the others."

He could not deny it, that eventually they would have to force «Heartseed» away from them, even if it meant sacrificing everything.

"But right now, you wanted to cheer me up as my thoughts were inclining towards the negative end of the spectrum, which is why you kept emphasising the optimistic side of things. Am I correct?"

"I don't think I was thinking that deeply."

"After all, there's always more than one side of things. So is the human mind, we can't make judgements based on only one perspective. Simply put, it would be something like 'what if I look at it this way' in our heads. Now consider this as a basis: 'Sentiment Transmission' does indeed directly send out our thoughts, but since it only takes a snapshot of our sentiment, we cannot guarantee whether it is showing us the whole picture or not. That being said, there is no denying that we truly did 'give such a thought.'"

Inaba thought 'I should dissolve the CRC,' but at the same time, she also thought 'Even then, I want to preserve the CRC.' Conflicting yet conforming situations like this happen all the time, the question was which side the others would see.

"...This conversation is turning into something weird, let's just end it right there. Say, why are we even guessing each other's intention like this?"

Guessing each other's intention, in other words, guessing each other's thoughts.

"But I... don't understand Nagase at all."

"...Me neither. I thought I would understand her more than anyone."

*Did Inaba think that way too?*

Taichi could not solve Nagase's problem on his own. But together with Inaba, they may be able to figure something out.

"Really though, what's going on with Nagase? Her attitude is strange; her thoughts, too, should I say frightening? Or cold? ...Anyway, she's like a completely different person now."

"I've always believed that she was one of those 'happy and carefree on the surface but also possessing a gloomy side' kind of people. But, I never thought she'd be so... If that, in her eyes, is the normal her, then it'd be like saying that the cheerful lori we've seen up until now was actually an act... No, that's absurd. What nonsense am I talking about? How could that be an act?"

"Yeah, that's... not possible."

Nagase once said, she had been assuming all kinds of persona, wearing all kinds of masks, and thus slowly losing sight of her true self. But that was only a matter of perspective. The Nagase that had been with them throughout the year could not possibly be a false image or an act. It could not be.

"I feel... I don't know how to approach lori anymore."

"...Me neither."

If she was simply in need, Taichi wanted to help her. But Nagase refused his help, as though she became like this on her own accord, even though she looked to be in pain.

"...I'm sorry."

Inaba apologised suddenly and lowered her head.

"Why are you apologising all of the sudden?"

"I was thinking, if I didn't make those unnecessary moves... It may not have ended up like this."

Her voice was extremely weak, as though it would be washed out by the light background music in the café.

"Had I not said that I love you, you and lori would have gone out already. Had it been that way, there would've been a different future ahead of you, lori wouldn't have ended up like this..."

Nagase, who no longer opened her heart to anyone.

"...Is that so?"

Taichi's face distorted. Fortunately, Inaba was not looking towards him.

"I interfered with your relationship. ...I'm sorry."

*Don't apologize*, Taichi thought.

*What am I going to do if you apologize like this.*

Inaba was not at fault. He was sure of that.

Because no matter what Inaba would have said to him, he would have ultimately been the one to make his decisions, as long as he was determined.

He remembered.

He thought he would love Nagase wholeheartedly, yet as soon as Inaba confessed to him, he wavered and became hesitant. He might had already been a lost cause since then.

"It wasn't Inaba's fault at all... No, I might have overstated it. After all, had Inaba not told me that... I might have started going out with Nagase."

"See...!"

Inaba lifted her head. Her eyes were filled with tears.

"However, I've never understood Nagase's feelings. It was all wrong to begin with... And with that, our distance grew apart."

It was only natural. He had never understood Nagase after all.

"Because of Inaba, I did become a bit confused at one point. But it doesn't matter. We would be heading towards the same ending nonetheless."

"...But if you had started going out, you would be able to better understand each other... And then..."

"But the one who hadn't done that was not anyone else, but me."

This was what he must acknowledge and not run away from.

"Inaba, you're not at fault."

Taichi told her earnestly.

In the face of others, he was able to put on a strong front.

Even though he knew he could not possibly act tough all the time, Taichi was glad that he was able to show his strong persona at this moment.

Thanks to that, he was able to see his way clearly.

After talking to Inaba, Taichi realised once again that he should not curl up in a corner and worry on his own.

"...I believe I was in love. However, it was a premature love. I did not understand the true meaning of love. I was never sure-footed. I was only blindly following my emotions."

He had always been pretentious, but in truth, he wished to become someone who could brave reality.

He would probably depress himself over the matter again as soon as he became alone at home. But for the time being, even just for a little, he wanted to look forward.

"Anyway, I was completely rejected, and I will need to start over. How will it turn out? Maybe I will pursue Nagase again. Maybe I won't. But one thing that I'm certain of, is that this isn't the end, but a beginning."

As Taichi asserted, he found himself feeling a lot better.

*That's right. There's nothing wrong with failure.* He told himself.

*All it takes is to start anew.*

*All it takes is to fall in love with the same person again.*

"Hey... In your starting anew... Does it include me as well?"

Inaba's question made Taichi realise another thing.

Inaba had gone through the same path he did as well. Inaba had confessed, and was rejected; but she did not lose heart, and declared battle again, claiming that she would not give up; and after yet another failure and starting over, she came to where she was standing now. It may sound self-indulgent, but Taichi was truly grateful to her.

"...If Inaba can forgive me that is."

In order to face all kinds of people and things, he must learn to re-examine everything.

"Do you really have to ask?"

Inaba let out a brief laugh. A warm smile emerged on her face.

Truth to be told, putting away his tough façade, Taichi thought he may still be reluctant to part with his feelings towards Nagase.

He could not tell how things would go on from then. After returning to zero, if he could fall in love with Nagase again, that would be wonderful indeed. And, as he was returning to zero, how would he perceive Inaba?

"Hey... Taichi."

After she softly wiped her eyes, Inaba shifted to a serious tone and called out to Taichi.

"You looked kinda handsome there, even though you've been rejected... Even though you've been rejected!"

"You don't have to repeat it twice!"

After conversing with Inaba, Taichi, who felt powerless towards Nagase, seemed to have found a bit of salvation.

□■□■□

The shock of being rejected by Nagase still lingered, and he still wasn't sure how to approach Nagase at the moment. But Taichi felt that, at least in face of love, he was able to pick up some courage and start anew, and look forward optimistically.

However for Taichi, he had something important that he must settle first.

Now that he recalled it, how did he manage to neglect such a serious problem? Even Taichi himself found it unbelievable.

"What's up? Onii-chan~"

Taichi's fifth-grader sister skipped from her room on the second floor to the living room.

"Sit down over there."

Taichi, who had sat ahead on the sofa, urged his sister to do the same.

"Why are you putting on a dignified look like that? It doesn't suit you at all!"

He thought his sister was being a little too talkative.

Anyway, she sat down as well, but...

"Why are you sitting next to me? Judging by the mood right now, you're supposed to sit across me no?"

"Who cares, same thing~ I'm busy too, just spit it out already~"

Even though she was his younger sister, she did not seem to show much respect for him.

"Can't say I mind... Ahem, actually I have something important to talk to you about."

"What is it that you need to be so formal?"

His sister tilted her head and asked.

Even though she was his younger sister, she was just too adorable... Wait, that wasn't not the point!

"You you still remember... what happened on Valentine's Day?"

"Valentine's Day? Onii-chan seemed very depressed that day, we didn't get to talk much."

"You gave me chocolate right?"

"Mhm, yup."

"You said something back then, yes?"

"What did I say?"

"Didn't you say something like 'By the way, this... this is my honmei-choco,' did you?"

"Ahh, I think I did. And?"

"W—What you mean and? Uh... I'm telling you, even though Onii-chan loves you, that's family love towards a sister! Even if you confess to me, we are siblings, ethically speaking—"

"Pff— Ahaha! What are you saying~ Did Onii-chan think I was actually liking you as a guy because I said 'This is honmei-choco'? Haha!"

"What... Eh! But..."

"Ahahaha, Onii-chan is so funny~ Really though, how could it be possible. In my eyes, Onii-chan is forever my Onii-chan!"

"Ah...Ahh, I see. I—I figured as much, but I had to clarify it just in case..."

The fact that he jumped to a conclusion so soon was very embarrassing for him.

"Ew~ Seriously Onii-chan, how much do you love me (pokes Taichi's cheek)?"

"Love, you mean... Eh, of course I do! We're siblings..."

"I've rarely heard of siblings who can be this loving! Then again, since Onii-chan genuinely cares about me this much and said that he loves me, I'm very happy you know~?"

"T—This is sibling love!"

"Haha, I get it already. But hey, I suppose I should reward Onii-chan something~ Hmm~ What should I give~? Aha, I know! Onii-chan, lend me your ear~"

"Hmm, what's up?"

"Chuu~ ❤"

"Wha— Wha— Wha— Wha— Wha— Wha— Wha....."

"By the way, this is... my first kiss! ❤"

"UWOOOOOOOOOOOH!"

[ *MY · SISTER · KISSED · ME · ON · THE · CHEEK!!!* ]

The next day, Taichi had to desperately explain to everybody that the relationship between him and his sister were entirely normal sibling love and did not violate the ethical boundary.

## Chapter 5 - The Striving Act of Kiriyma Yui

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The P.E. class sessions in Yamaboshi High were made up of students from two classes.

Kiriyma Yui's (and Aoki Yoshifumi's) class, class 1A, and Inaba Himeko, Nagase Iori, Yaegashi Taichi's class, class 1C, were in the same session. In other words, all five members of the CRC would be present in the same class. For Yui, this was something to anticipate for. She had always enjoyed sports, combined with that other fact, P.E. became Yui's favorite class.

The first year girl students were having a football game.

The whistle sounded, and the second half of the match began.

This was a game between Team A class 1A and Team B class 1C.

"Yui, catch!"

A teammate passed the ball to Yui.

Yui caught the ball with her right foot, and dribbled the ball forward in a series of agile steps. She charged into the opposing team's territory, the ball stayed close by her foot.

Players from the other team approached her from the front, attempting to flank her.

But they were not members from the football club, their defense were nothing in face of Yui. She breezed through the opponent's field, swiftly dodging any incoming opposing players, and shot!

"Eek!" The goalkeeper squeezed out a weak whimper and ducked aside. The ball entered the keeper-less goal, the impact even shook up the entire gate.

"Yay!"

Yui made a victory gesture with her hands.

"Nice shot, Yui... But, could you not unleash your prowess of passing through five players in a row during P.E. class?"

Yui's good friend Yukina said to her with a complicated look on her face.

*Fweet*— Fujishima Maiko, the referee of the game, blew the whistle.

"Goal point! Team A class 1A scores a point, and a special yellow card penalty for Kiriyma-san!"

"Eh? Why? What's a special yellow card penalty?"

"No reason. Until I permit it, Kiriyma-san you are forbidden to enter the opponent team's territory. Please limit your range of activity within your team's half of the field."

"What kind of special rule is that? That's ridiculous! Don't everyone agree?"

Despite Yui's protest, everyone including her teammates showed no hint of objection.

"Yui, if you go all out, the game would be completely one-sided..."

Yui was baffled that Yukina, of all people, told her that.

*I've been holding back the first half, so I just wanted to get in the game a little during the second half, that's all there is... Pfft!*

However, Yui restrained herself from advancing anyway, and remained a back line support, passing the ball to her teammates. After all, it was only a class, she should cooperate with everyone else.

It was an easy task for Yui, and for that reason, she was free enough to peer at the neighbouring field.

As her eyes followed that certain someone, she quickly realised one thing:

—No one was passing the ball to Iori.

There was nobody guarding her, her teammates seemed to be aware of it too. Yet, no one passed the ball to her. Iori would normally be the most central and enthusiastic figure during the P.E. classes, but now...

It was as though she was being ignored.

Iori's expression was very gloomy. She had been that way lately.

"Yui! Look out!"

Yui responded to her teammate's warning, and saw an opposing player attempting to dribble pass around her. Yui took one, two step, closing on the other player, swiftly stole the ball from her and passed it to her teammate.

"S—Such precise movements in such a short time frame..."

Yukina was murmuring something, but did not seem to be talking to her, so Yui did not give much thought to it.

Yui looked towards the neighbouring field again.

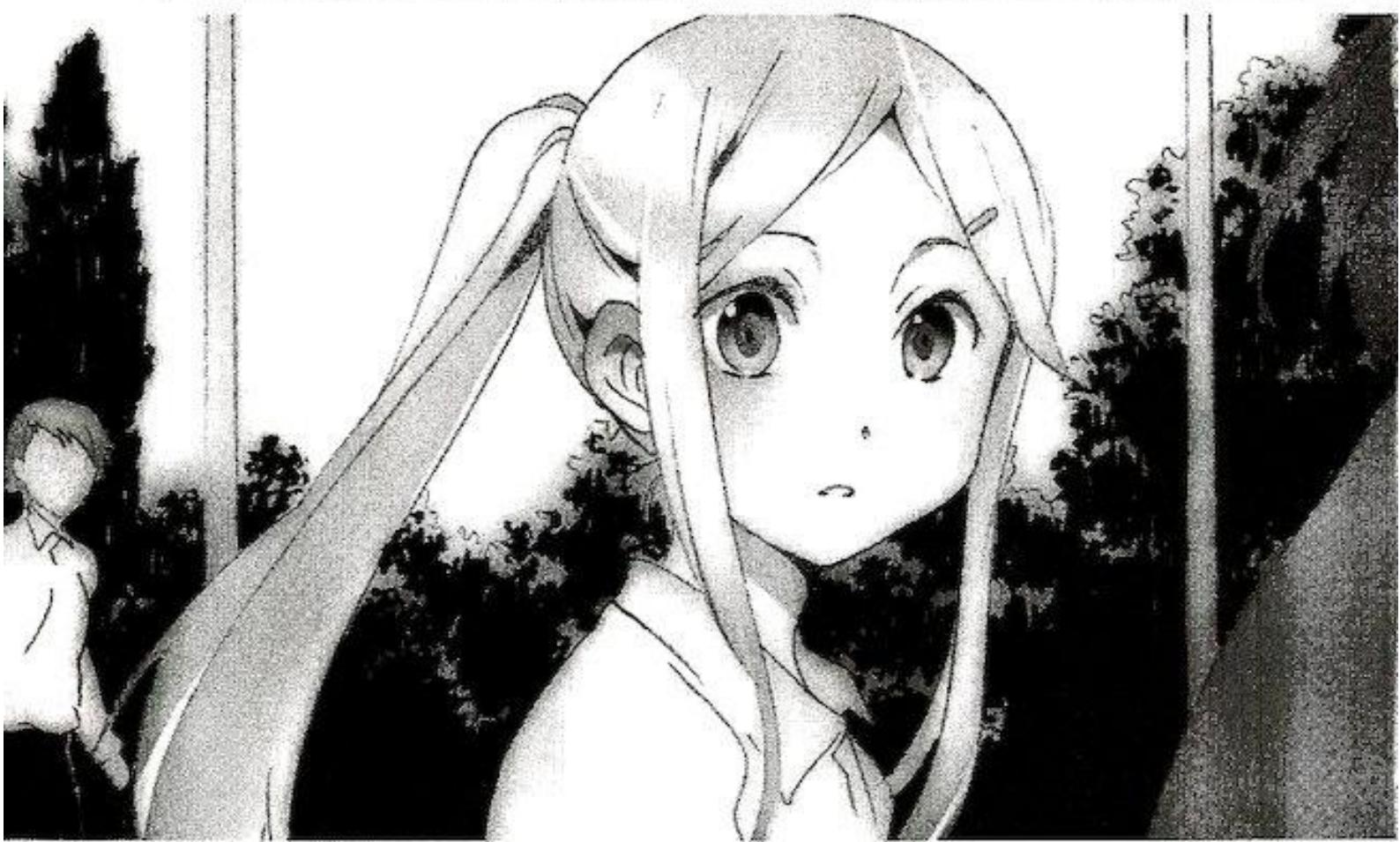
Iori was still unable to join the offense line, but merely wandering at the back of the field.

At that moment...

"Ah!"

Iori was knocked over by one of her own teammate.

The girl responsible (Yui couldn't remember her name, it was Setouchi or something) did not apologize to Iori either; she simply ran straight for the middle field.



"Was— Was that on purpose...?"

*That looked nothing like an accident.*

Before the end of the game, Team A class 1A was one point behind. After Yui was permitted to join the offense line, she scored two points and won the game back for her team. The game ended. After cleaning up the field, the class did stretching exercise, and concluded the P.E. class.

Yui wanted to talk to Iori, but since they were on different fields, she could not find the right opportunity to do so.

During Yui's observation, Iori only talked to Inaba briefly and did not talk to anyone else. Yui thought Iori would usually be more cheerful and social.

*Wait a minute, I thought Taichi's close by? He could at least show up and say hi no? Iori is all by herself, is it really okay?*

Though Yui understood that it might be difficult for Taichi, who was rejected, to do so.

"You've been watching Nagase-san the whole time."

Yukina said to Yui, and continued hesitantly:

"Um, I've been hearing that..."

"What?"

"There's been some bad rumours about Nagase-san, something about she was pretending to be sweet, or seducing guys with her looks, and coldly rejecting others and such..."

"Yukina, you aren't going to believe those rumours are you?"

"OK, OK, I get it, stop giving me that scary look! ...From what I heard from you, she's supposed to be a very nice person. But, those who doesn't know her well would easily believe those rum— ...I said stop giving me that look already!"

*Who was it? Who was spreading those rumours about Iori?*

On the way towards the locker room, Yui finally found a chance to talk to Iori.

"Hey, Iori."

"...What?"

"Uh..."

Ah, Yui did not know what to say.

[ *Oh, that girl's got some nice bust.* ]

*That pig head pervert Aoki who and where the hell is he looking at and besides you are not suppose to judge a girl's cuteness base on breast size actually what the hell I'm busy stop interfering!*

"Erm... About our class just now... Mmph!"

Yui clasped her hands on her mouth. She brought up the topic in a flurry. However, for Lori right now, bring it up may not be a good idea.

*Should I leave it... No, I mustn't avoid her now—*— Yui thought and decided to pursue.

"About our class just now, you don't seem alright."

Although Lori had already been like that lately to begin with.

"...No such thing."

"But no one's been passing the ball to you..."

It wasn't just Lori. The people around her didn't seem alright either.

"...It was just a coincident."

"Really? Did something strange hap—"

[ *Stop it, stop talking to me.* ]

It was Lori's 'Sentiment Transmission.'

Confusing, chaotic feelings flowed into Yui's mind.

Her legs were frozen.

Lori walked forward and left, but Yui was unable to bring herself to walk by Lori's side.

From those sentiments she received, Yui could tell that something was troubling Iori, yet Yui did not understand what it was.

She had directly received the Iori's feelings, yet Yui was unable to understand her.

She had shared the pain, yet Yui was unable to reach out to her.

*This is just too sad...* thought Yui, her hand clutching on her chest.

Even in face of finals preparation (In addition to Yui's busy training at the dojo,) the CRC members continued to work on their club presentation, namely the map that introduces recommended points of interest around the school.

"A cafe that serves as great dating spot yet not widely known, a Chinese restaurant that serves cheap and huge meals, a shop that sells cute accessories, a salon that's small in scale but provides excellent services... And many more others. Wow, we've actually been visiting all these places. That's amazing!"

Yui was impressed by everybody's work.

"...Though I also see one that is obviously a personal point of interest... such as the gym that often organizes pro-wrestling matches."

Yui muttered quietly, but Taichi immediately reacted to her statement.

"What!? You didn't know that particular gym had once organized one of the most important event in pro-wrestling hist——"

Before Taichi could finish, Inaba talked over him and said:

"These info booklets are coming out quite nicely. If we did some formal editing, we could sell them for money."

"Jeez, Inaba, you don't have to keep on pulling things in that direction you know."

Yui ignored Taichi. Ah, he looked bummed out. Poor Taichi.

"To be honest though, we really shouldn't have made our report data into booklets and then use these booklets as the basis of our oral report. We've been spending way too much time on making these booklets."

Inaba complained.

According to their plan, when the CRC exhibits the map during the presentation event, they would need booklets with detailed and organized information, as well as paper vellum to add to the impact of their oral report on stage.

Now, they had finally reached the stage to work on their paper vellum. Although they only needed to handcraft a simplistic, easy-to-understand map that summarizes the info and location of the points of interest with a design that would leave a good impression, the amount of data they had collected was overwhelming.

In the wide, spacious media classroom, in order to let the back row audience see clearly, the displaying text on the map must be enlarged. Hence, they prepared an exceptional amount of paper vellum (roughly 1 square meter each.) And since the judges, who wanted to observe the reaction of the other students, would be sitting in the back, the CRC could not adjust the text size.

Truth to be told, they were somewhat tight on time.

"Is this title text good enough, Inaba-chan?"

Aoki inquired Inaba in club room. The room was noisier and messier than usual.

"Yeah, that will do... Psh, now that you mention it, we're probably stressing too much on the design, it's so much hassle! I really shouldn't have used professional-looking manuals like «Your Complete Guide to Advertisement Design»Your Complete Guide to Advertisement Design> for references!"

Not only that. Inaba had even picked up books about typography and color theories. Once got started she would want the best results—very true to Inaba's style indeed. The whole process was tough. Should they finish the project, however, it would be a product that far exceeds the expectations of any normal high-schooler event (Should such events exist.) Yui felt it was a waste to only use it on the club presentation event.

"The amount of content is ridiculous! I kinda want to compromise a little... but if we lose because of that, I'll kill myself! I hate losing!"

"Stop shaking, Inaba, you're gonna mess up the text."

Taichi reminded a somewhat hysterical Inaba.

They worked together excitedly.

However, Iori, the president of the CRC as well as the cheer bringer, was not present.

Yui suddenly realised that fact.

Iori had not been showing up in the club room lately, and even when she did, she would leave after only a brief stay.

'Sentiment Transmission.' This was the name of the phenomenon triggered by «Heartseed» this time.

They had this alarming occasion where everyone's love affairs were brutally exposed, but the CRC managed to maintain its balance. Yui figured it was probably because they had already gotten used to it.

However, they were not able to evade the crisis unscathed. Iori especially, was the one who took the heaviest blow in this incident.

Judging by the time frame, Yui was certain that Iori's issue had something to do with 'Sentiment Transmission' phenomenon. The negative rumours would have certain amount of impact on Iori as well.

What happened during the P.E. class today might have hurt Iori deeply.

Even though she did not quite grasp it due to confusion, now that she thought it, the 'Sentiment Transmission' that Yui received, Iori's sentiment, was filled with immense sorrow.

"Yui, stop spacing out! If you as the most handy person slacked off, we would never get it done even when we were able to do so to begin with!"

Inaba tapped Yui's shoulder with her pen.

"Inaba... Just because you're clumsy doesn't mean you need to take it out on Kiriyama."

"Wha...! I absolutely was not trying to criticize nor take anything out on Yui with that statement just now don't you jump to conclusions on your own and act like I'm the bad guy here Taichi! And don't call me clumsy!"

"Wow, Inaba-chan is able to jab with such a long remark and not twist her tongue, that's so cool!"

As they were bickering, Yui felt delighted to have such companions.

However...

"My bad, I was thinking about Iori... Ah."

*Oh no... I shouldn't have said that.*

"Nagase you say..."

Taichi's face turned sombre.

*I really shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry.*

Inaba spoke:

"This was that bastard's gimmick after all... Something's bound to happen. Even if this phenomenon doesn't directly affect the outside world, with that its severeness isn't as dreadful when compared with ones we've gone through before, the fact still remains. Not to mention 'Sentiment Transmission' will also... No, forget I said th—"

[ *Terrifying... It's terrifying... Really terrifying...* ]

It was Inaba's 'Sentiment Transmission,' a sentiment filled with extreme anxiety and fear, one that would easily crush one's heart.

Look of panic flickered across Inaba's face.

However, that look immediately vanished without a trace. Inaba fixated her eyes on Yui.

Under those slender eyelashes, her limpid eyes gazed into Yui's with a strong, determined will.

—No need to say anything. I'm fine.

Yui could feel Inaba saying that to her.

Inaba cleared her throat, and said:

"...Anyway, fortunately enough for me, things that could seriously affect me at the present, 'things that I don't want others to know,' have not yet run into 'Sentiment Transmission' phenomenon so far. Should that happen though... Actually, I don't want to think about it. This may have happened to Iori already, ...though I still don't understand what it is."

Even though she was so worried, Inaba continued to put on her upright demeanour.

Yui knew Inaba was a worrier.

But Yui never expected her to be constantly living in fear like this.

Not to mention, Inaba never let any bit of those emotion surface. She would always put on a strong front so that the rest of them would feel assured.

Yui had always thought Inaba to be a strong and amazing person. But now she also realised that all these times Inaba had been battling hard against her own weakness, urging herself to be strong.

Yui never knew Inaba had been striving so hard.

Had she been unknowingly living under Inaba's shelter all these time? The shelter of whom had been striving so hard for their sake?

The club room entered a moment of silence. The air became heavy.

The one to shatter that gloomy atmosphere, was Aoki with his cheerful, carefree voice.

"Anyhow~ Iori-chan would know to ask for help when she's in need. We'll just wait till then! And when Iori-chan does ask for our help, we'll reach out for her headstrong! That's all we can do now!"

Aoki asserted confidently.

The sharp contrast in mood startled Yui, but she immediately caught on Aoki's intention, and smiled:

"I suppose you're right."

This man was able to change any mood by his will alone.

Even though he acted naturally, Aoki must have had his moment of doubt and fought hard before. Yui deeply respected his nothing-to-lose attitude.

[ *It's what I like about you, you know.* ]

"Wha...!"

*Why did 'Sentiment Transmission' transmit that one part of my thoughts!? And the receivers had to be Aoki, Inaba and Taichi too!*

"Y—Yui... Was that 'Sentiment Transmission' just now for real? ...No wait, it's 'Sentiment Transmission' so it's gotta be real! YESSSSHHHH! Yui is finally sending me signal of lov— Mmph!?"

Yui stuffed Aoki's mouth with a ball of paper to shut him up.

"Fweh...! (Cough)... What you do that for? I was only trying to state the truth!"

"Shut up! I was only referring to one of your traits! Don't get any funny ideas!"

"...Well I sure haven't seen such an obvious tsundere before."

"Not just tsundere, your face is completely red too, Kiriyama."

"Inaba and Taichi both need to shut up as well! I'm gonna start kicking people you know!"

*Everyone's laughing~ My cheeks are burning up~ Stop laughing already~*

Yui puffed her cheeks and started throwing a fit, so everyone else apologized to Yui one by one.

*If they think apologizing would make me forgive them, they're dead wrong... Even though I would forgive them anyway.*

"But, like Aoki said."

Taichi spoke.

"I believe right now, the only thing that we should and can do for Nagase is... to protect the CRC. Nagase is the president of CRC. Therefore, let's continue to work hard on our club presentation for now."

Taichi was rejected by Iori, yet he said that for Iori's sake with a strong and earnest will.

Due to 'Sentiment Transmission,' Yui knew how hard it was for Taichi to be rejected.

Yet, he continued to speak for Iori's sake... Even though 'the only thing' part sounded a little pessimistic.

Yui felt a burning desire ignited within her.

She did not want to lose to Aoki, who had been striving his best.

She wanted to share the burden of Inaba and Taichi, who had been striving their best.

She wanted to help Iori, who had been struggling over something.

She had been living under the shelter of everyone else, but Yui had decided: She would become strong. From now on, she wanted to protect them with her own hands.

She must fight, and fight hard. Otherwise, she would never be on equal grounds with them.

The question was, what could she do now?

"...Can I head off for today?"

"Don't be ridiculous. If we lose you today, we'll fall behind schedule."

As expected, Inaba reprimanded her, but Yui's decision remained firm.

"It's alright, I promise I'll work extra hard to make it up afterwards."

Yui packed up her tools. She put her stationary in her case and stood up.

"You alright, Yui? Do you need my help?"

"No, I'll be enough by myself."

Yui declined Aoki's help.

"Oi, oi, Kiriyama, I don't think you should be so reckless..."

"I'll be fine! And Taichi you're not the one to talk here!"

Yui ignored Taichi's warning.

"Dammit Yui, didn't I say hold on?"

Lastly, Inaba stood in front of the door, blocking Yui's way.

"I can harness a guess at what you're about to do..."

Inaba scratched her head and muttered.

"But, I don't think this is a good time for that."

Inaba's expression was serious.

"If she has the need, she would say so herself. And more importantly... I think it's dangerous."

"Dangerous? Why?"

"Because you..."

Inaba stopped halfway, and lowered her head.

"I'll be fine, Inaba. I've become stronger."

Yui smiled at Inaba.

Inaba knit her brows in hesitation, but eventually her expression softened.

"I'll be off then!"

Yui ran past Inaba and departed.

"I'm gonna head straight for your home now!"

Yui notified Iori with a call and hopped on the train towards Iori's house.

She wanted to talk to Iori properly.

Merely listening to pieces or limiting herself to greetings was not enough.

She must talk directly to Iori, face to face.

The others were being considerate for Iori, but they seemed to be leaning towards the passive spectrum.

—*If she has the need, she would say so herself.*

It was an entirely logical take.

However, there was a chance that even Iori herself didn't know what went wrong. She could have been in a pinch where she could not ask for help on her own.

Everyone were most likely aware of this. But if they delve in too much, they might end up pushing her into a corner. Sometimes it might be better to let her cool her head a little. Not to mention it was Iori's inner problem, there was nothing they could do. And combining with 'Sentiment Transmission'... *Ugh! Whatever!* Yui dismissed her contemplations.

However, she also believed that there are things that can't be understood without direct confrontation.

Not to mention, no choice is guaranteed.

Even with so many uncertainty, the most important thing is the courage to take the first step.

She, too, could fight hard. She would fight hard for everyone else to see.

She could do the same.

As she was thinking to herself, she had arrived at the station.

After a bit of walking from the gate, Yui saw Iori coming from the front.

"Ah, Iori."

Yui rushed towards her.

"I'm sorry for suddenly calling you like this, saying stuff like I'm heading straight for your home and having you pick me up..."

"It's alright." Iori replied.

Her expression was flat. She did not smile at Yui.

Iori's face, which looked perfect like a crafted piece of art. After it lost its usual vibrant color, it remained beautiful, yet became a little frightening as well.

She figured it would be inconvenient to converse in the middle of the walkway, hence Yui decided to relocate at a nearby restaurant's parking lot.

Yui did not enter the restaurant, as she planned to return to the club room right afterwards.

Iori was the one who spoke first.

"We've been through this before, haven't we? Though our positions have reversed compared to then."

"Eh?" Yui did not catch on for a moment, but she soon realised what Iori meant.

"Ahh, yeah."

It happened during the 'Desire Unleash' phenomenon. Yui had shut herself up in her room, refused to go to school and caused many problems for the others.

At that time, Iori was the most persistent among them. She ran all over the place for them, visited Yui multiple times despite her rejection.

*She had fought very hard for me, which is why it's my turn to do the same now, thought Yui.*

"Eh, Iori, about 'Sentiment Transmission'... What do you think of it?"

"What I think...?"

"Uh, I mean, are you feeling troubled or hurt?"

"This is... indeed very troubling."

"C—Can you be more specific?"

"Isn't troubling, painful a good enough answer?"

Iori stared impassively towards somewhere near Yui's chest.

*...This isn't going to be easy. This is harder than expected.*

Yui paused for a moment and took a deep breath.

"Iori you seem extremely sad though, and you seemed to be in deep pain."

Yui felt it through 'Sentiment Transmission.'

"I wish to do something for you, Iori."

"I don't think there's anything you can do."

Iori brutally rejected Yui's benevolence, but Yui was not about to give up.

"Hey, is something wrong, Iori? You used to work harder than anyone, smile more than anyone and cheer for everyone, yet you've been looking so gloomy lately. Iori, I've always been indebt to you! Even just a little, I want to help you return to normal, I—"

"What the hell is there to return normal!?"

Iori retorted in a rude tone.

"Yui haven't seen anything, you don't know anything, you've never noticed! No, not just Yui, you're all the same! Everyone... None of you saw the real me."

Iori's voice began to tremble at the end.

"...What do you mean?"

"I'm... tired... It's too late. I can't keep up anymore... I can't."

*Stop saying 'can't,' stop looking so sad please...*

"It can't be too late, and besides, what you mean you can't, of course you—"

[ *I can't be Yui's friend anymore.* ]

*You're lying! Why? There's no such thing! Don't talk like that.*

Even if it were sentiments from Iori, even if it meant those feelings were real, Yui would not accept it. She would not accept it. Would not accept it.

"I love Iori... This will never change..."

If only she could let Lori feel this sentiment through 'Sentiment Transmission,' Yui thought.

"...No matter how much I changed?"

"Of course."

"Even if I changed completely?"

"Yes."

"Then, what makes Yui want to be friends with me? If I changed completely, with no trace of what I was before, wouldn't I be like a complete stranger?"

In other words... It was difficult to grasp, but Yui understood her.

"We still have our memories, don't we?"

"So as long as they were friends before, no matter how corrupted one of them has become, say a criminal, they would still remain friends?"

"Uh... Er..."

*Is this a debate? How should I counter that? How should I answer? This is frightening. What should I do, what should I do—*

[ *Lori isn't that kind of people.* ]

"Ah..."

It was Yui's own 'Sentiment Transmission' towards Lori.

How? Why? Yui did not know the reason, but her instinct told her that this thought must never be forwarded to Lori.

However, what was sent out could never be taken back.

It was no a wrong choice of words, nor an impulsive remark, but rather the truest truthful feeling.

[ *That is why I can't be Yui's friend anymore. I can't, I can't...* ]

'Sentiment Transmission' triggered again. Iori's feelings flowed into Yui. It was sorrowful and lonely and bitter and lonesome and heavy and desolate and painful as if her body was being torn to shreds.

At that moment, Yui seemed to have understood why Inaba warned her that it was 'dangerous' back at the club room.

Under 'Sentiment Transmission,' should these feelings that were buried deep within each other's heart were exchanged, what would happen?

When both parties' thoughts become translucent and open, their true selves would be completely exposed. They could not afford to let this kind of conversation take place.

Yui and Iori, an apparent gap had begun to emerge between them.

She had failed.

She was powerless.

She could see no way to reach into Iori's frozen heart.

She could no longer try.

—*Somebody help me.*

Yui dragged herself heavily along the dark street under the night.

She contracted her body, shielding herself from the cold wind as much as possible, and clenched then loosen her fingers in her gloves. There had already been traces of spring's arrival during the day. Yet, it was painstakingly cold during the night, as though wanting to freeze anyone who dared to walk in the open cold.

But Yui wanted to walk home on foot anyway.

*Inaba and the others should have headed home by now.*

She ended up skipping the club activity, Yui felt a little guilty for that.

She thought she was confident, believed she could complete her objective, yet she only succeeded in widening the wound.

She was confident, but it appeared she was merely self-indulgent.

Her cell phone vibrated. Someone was calling her. Yui took off the glove from her right hand and examined the screen.

The caller was Mihashi Chinatsu.

She was Yui's rival in karate during grade school and middle school. They had been apart for a while, but after reuniting and going through a series of conflicts during the winter break, the two had become friends.

Yui picked up the call. She felt it might be a long conversation, so she took refuge from the cold in a near by bus station's waiting room.

After Yui listened to Chinatsu, she began discussing her own issue. Needless to say, she avoided mentioning anything about «Heartseed» or the phenomena, and glossed through most of the details.

The heat waiting room was warm, and there was nobody else in there.

"—That's about it. Chinatsu, what do you think I should do?"

*"Well, it's difficult for me to say since I don't know the details... But honestly, I think it's better to leave it alone. Time can solve a lot of things you know."*

"I can't do that! I can't..."

Yui thought it would be irresponsible.

*"...That being said though, I didn't call you to listen to this you know, didn't I say I have things to talk to you about as well?"*

"My problem is more dire though!"

*"It may be dire, but I'm an outsider, there isn't much I can do you know."*

"Chinatsu you're so uncaring."

*"Yes, yes, I'm uncaring I know. I thought you of all people should know that already."*

"But I'm really troubled! Help me out already!"

*"Ha!" Chinatsu laughed on the other end of the phone. "What? Even till now, you are still relying on others?"*

Relying on others. These three words echoed clearly in Yui's mind.

"N—No! I tried, but it didn't work..."

*"...Sorry, I was a bit jumpy. Yui must be working hard too, so—"*

Disruptive, electric noise sounded suddenly.

The voice from the other end of the phone faded, and the conversation ended.

A low-battery alert was displayed on the phone screen.

"...Bummer."

Unfortunately, Yui did not bring any spare battery.

She sat alone in the waiting room.

She was drenching in sweat. The heat seemed too powerful. Such a waste of energy, she thought.

The sound of sliding door came.

The cold air from the outside rushed into the waiting room and collided with Yui's cheeks that were red from the heat.

—*Thuk, thuk.*

Footsteps. Yui lifted her head.

Only to find herself face to face with what appeared to be an expressionless CRC club advisor Gotou Ryuuzen—

—«Heartseed» was standing before her.

"Ah... Ah... Ahh..."

Yui thought her heart stopped beating. No, it did stop beating for a moment. She was sure of it. She could not breathe. She was terrified. Then her heart started pounding at a frightening speed. Her face was burning. Her face was freezing. Was it hot or cold? Her hands couldn't stop shivering.

"...Good afternoon, Kiriyama-san... Oh? It's evening right now, should I say good evening? Ahh... I still haven't gotten used to greeting yet, I suppose I shouldn't push myself like that..."

A tone that was sluggish and flat, a voice that was both sticky and dry, an air that reeked of negative abnormality—

*Help me!* Yui thought she was going to be swallowed whole.

A different kind of sweat began to drench her.

"...What's wrong, Kiriyama-san? You don't look very well... not that it concerns me..."

Was he trying to ask her a question or not? Was he concerned or not?

"Am I over thinking? ...It seems the number of times I've seen Kiriyama-san is much less than that of the others... We never had many chances to converse either..."

He was right. During both the 'Desire Unleash' and 'Time Regression' phenomena, Yui did not interact with «Heartseed». When he showed up to explain the phenomenon this time, Yui felt it was like eternity since the last time she faced him. Though, at the time, everyone was present, and now she was alone.

"Er... If you don't say something... it's gonna end up looking like my personal talk show with me talking to myself... Not that it hasn't happened already..."

"W—What do you want?"

Yui managed to squeeze words out of her throat.

She and «Heartseed» were the only ones in the waiting room. «Heartseed» was blocking the entrance. If she wanted to escape, she had to get pass around him.

Yui heard «Heartseed» appeared to Aoki when he was alone. Because of that, Inaba had warned them to be extra careful as it might happen again.

But Yui did not take it to heart despite being directly involved. She was too careless.

Should she bring herself to fight him head on? No, she could not win that way. Yui understood it well. After all, «Heartseed» had subdued her with his overwhelming power.

"Ahh... Please don't start a fight... I don't want any trouble here..."

Did he see through her mind?

"Well then... Kiriyama-san... About the phenomenon this time, what do you think of it?"

What was the meaning of that question?

"...Are you not afraid?"

*I'm afraid. Of course I'm afraid*, Yui thought. «Heartseed»'s presence alone was frightening enough. It was all too bizarre to begin with.

"The fact your most hidden secrets would be exposed in the air, are you not afraid?"

His tone was becoming assertive and strong. Why?

"Most hidden..."

It was terrible. Yui knew how much the phenomenon could hurt people. Lori was hurt, and Yui felt she hurt Lori as well. By sharing Lori's dark and cold sentiment, Yui knew Lori was hurt, and herself as well along the way.

Eventually, everyone would find out.

It was as though she was stripped naked, without any protection. Her dirty side, her awful side, would all be exposed, and would become hated and shamed—Yui realised she had just caught a glimpse of the worst outcome.

Yui knew it was an extremely dreadful scenario. Hence she tried not to look at it, think of it nor aware of it. They had decided on that together since the beginning.

It was because once they would realise it, they would be sucked into it, like a person would in a quicksand. Hence they tried to maintain a common heart. They had gotten used to it in a certain sense, which was why they managed to hold on. However, Yui herself was now trapped in the quicksand.

*What should I do? What should I do?* She realised it and could no longer stop it. Jealousy, envy, contempt, denial, disgust... Her negative emotions began to surge within her.

«Heartseed», with Gotou's appearance, was piercing through her with his murky gaze.

[ *Help me.* ]

'Sentiment Transmission' triggered.

Her feelings forwarded to Aoki and Taichi.

*Thank goodness*, she thought. She would be safe now. They would help her. They may not know where she is, but they would definitely find their

way. She could be at ease. It will be fine, she told herself. Her friends would help her...

—*Even till now, you are still relying on others?*

Chinatsu's voice rang in Yui's ears.

The voice was so clear, for a moment Yui thought the 'Sentiment Transmission' phenomenon triggered. Needless to say, it was not the case.

*Don't want to lose.*

It was the only thing in Yui's mind.

Even if she was about to lose, or feeling painful, wanting to cry, facing terrible odds... She did not want to lose.

She wanted to become a stronger person.

The fire rekindled within her, and Yui remembered.

—*I won't lose to anyone or anything anymore!*'

She had sworn that to herself.

What she needed to say was not 'Help me.'

Yui stood up.

She placed her moved her left foot and arm forward.

She lifted her hand at the height of her chin.

Yui braced and stood in battle stance.

She contracted her abdomen, and stared at «Heartseed».

"...What are you trying to do..."

"I'm scared, and I hate the 'Sentiment Transmission' phenomenon from my gut, but I've already made up my mind. I will not run away. And besides, I've already got an embarrassing enough record to begin with, I doubt it could get any worse."

*Huh, «Heartseed» doesn't seem so frightening anymore, she thought.*

"Everyone is doing their best. I, too, can fight hard."

Inaba, Aoki, Taichi... and Iori as well.

Yui realised one very important thing.

The ideal words to a companion, was not 'Help me,' nor 'I will do my best on my own.'

The ideal words would be 'Let's do our best together.'

"...I see, it seems it would have no effect no matter what I say... Ahh... How should I put it..."

«Heartseed»'s shoulders that were already quite slanted dropped even more. His lazy expression became lazier... Or should one say, he looked dejected?

"...This is probably not the best idea... And besides, I'm getting bored of it, should I call it then? ...More importantly, it's such a hassle. But to interact directly... Ahh."

«Heartseed», as though realising something, nodded his head.

"...So it was exactly because of this... that that one wanted to butt in... No, no, should I say I'm becoming interesting as well? ..."

*That one? Did he mean «Number Two»? Becoming interesting? Does that mean «Heartseed» is changing as well?*

"That being said... Kiriyama-san have become stronger, haven't you... That would probably make you even less interesting than Aoki-san... Or should I say that was actually quite interesting? Next time should be..."

"Hey."

"Ahh..."

"Can you stop talking to yourself like I'm not here? Do you have anymore business with me?"

She was able to converse normally now. She was actually quite bold after all, Yui thought to herself. Though she might argue that it was just a side effect of feeling numb.

"No... It's... settled... Good bye."

"...Good bye."

He greeted her. Now that she thought of it, «Heartseed» had been greeting her both at the start and the end, as though he was treating her like a friend.

«Heartseed» turned around and exited the waiting room.

The door slid shut.

As the door slid shut, Yui collapsed and sat on the floor.

"Ahh~ That was scary—"

Yui never dreamt she would be facing off against «Heartseed» on her own. She managed it, and she had this weird sense of accomplishment. Yet, she still felt—

[ *That was scary.* ]

'Sentiment Transmission' triggered again.

[ *Where!?* ] [ *Where!?* ]

This time, it was 'Sentiment Transmission' from both Aoki and Taichi.

*Jeez them two are nosy, even though I was the one who asked for help to begin with.*

Yui replied half-jokingly in her head.

[ *In the bus waiting room nearest to my house!* ]

Ah, it was Yui's 'Sentiment Transmission' this time.

*...It's almost like we're talking through telepathy.*

Seemed like a practical way to utilize 'Sentiment Transmission.'

Yui wanted to tell them that she no longer need help, but she did not have any other contact methods, so she could only stay at her spot and wait. She tried focusing her mind in hopes of triggering 'Sentiment Transmission' to send out a message, but the phenomenon seemed to be ignoring her at the moment.

"Puff... Puff... Are you... Are you alright, Kiriyama!?"

Taichi was the first to arrive.

*Aren't you supposed to be doing everything you can to arrive the scene first, Aoki...? Yui thought. Man, this is one thing that he sucks at.*

But judging by the situation, it probably couldn't be helped. After all, Aoki could be coming from home or somewhere out in town. No, perhaps it was a simple case that Taichi happened to know how to make a perfect entrance.

"Er... Sorry, Taichi. But I'm fine now."

Yui planned to relay the details tomorrow, so she skimped through some details and briefly told Taichi what happened.

"I see... He really did appeared quite a number of times this round. I'm guessing his next target would be me or Inaba or Nagase...?"

"He said he was getting bored of it, so he probably won't show up again."

"...Getting bored?"

Yui couldn't blame Taichi for feeling puzzled.

"Say, Taichi."

Yui, still savouring what she had learned during her confrontation, spoke to Taichi.

"Ever since «Heartseed» started those strange phenomena, everyone has been working hard no? But when I compare myself to you guys, I feel like I haven't done anything. So I wanted to work even harder."

"I believe Kiriyma to have worked hard as well."

"Thank you. But, you guys only thought of protecting me, but you never felt the need to be protected by me, am I right?"

"Uh..."

Truth to be told, Taichi was not exactly the most expressive person in the world, but any shift in emotion would be immediately written on his face, thus making him very easy to read. He was a very fun person to be with.

"I didn't want to stay like that, which was why I ignored Inaba's warning and tried to talk to Iori... but I failed."

She felt the need to acknowledge her mistakes.

"Failed, you say... I failed too. I was completely... rejected by Nagase."

Taichi's face became sombre.

"I didn't understand Nagase at all... Which is why... there's nothing I could do for her."

"That's not true! Iori must be waiting for Taichi to reach out for her!"

"But she doesn't seem to wish that way at all... What's there for me to do...?"

"Taichi, you've been really useless lately."

Was she becoming emotional? Yui wondered why Taichi was backing slightly away from her.

"You used to be a lot more persevering in these matters."

Taichi had become more reserved, most likely due to growth, because Taichi had become more considerate of his surroundings. If he was like before, recklessly charging ahead like a dummy, it would be a headache for Yui as well... Such as kicking himself in his source of life!

"Speaking of which, Taichi, how could you turn a blind eye on Iori like that? Can't you see what's happening to her in class?"

"That's because..."

Yui attempted to get words out from him, and she managed to hit right at the point.

*Is that so? Iori's already involved in such a troubling situation, in fact it may be a lot worse than I expected.*

"By the way, I just thought of something... Taichi said earlier today, that the only thing we can do for Iori is 'to continue to work hard on our club presentation.' Don't you think it's a bit pathetic coming from you?"

Of course, Yui could sympathize with the view on not to push Iori too much before she was willing to ask for help. But looking from a different angle, it was the same as abandoning her to her own. Iori's inner issue may be a difficult wall at the moment, but there must be something they could do about the external issues right?

"I want to do something for Nagase as well, but I don't know what she really wished for..."

Maybe.

Iori had been difficult lately.

Yui could sympathize with Taichi, but something about this conversation began to infuriate her.

"I failed miserably... I... What am I supposed to do...?"

*Boom*— Yui exploded.

"Quit acting like a whiny pansy already! Are you a man or not!? You think you're the only one feeling lost in here!? I tried too! And I failed like a pile of goo!"

Yui was fuming with steam, there was no stopping to her rage.

"So what if you failed!? You should be thinking about what to do so that you won't fail next time!"

The same could be said to herself.

"Truth to be told, I have no right to lecture you here! But you're just being ridiculous now, I just gotta yell at you for that you know!? You're thinking I look like some hysterical woman right now, aren't you? Then stop making me play this kind of ugly character you fool!"

"...Eh? Uh... Sorry."

"You think apologizing will make it alright!? You think that's all there is!? Even though in the end, I will of course... forgive you anyway!"

"Th—Thank you..."

Taichi said with a "What the heck is she trying to tell me" look on his face, much to Yui's chagrin.

They did not say another word, and entered a brief period of awkward silence.

*I must have blabbered many irresponsible things...* Yui reflected. She had only just made such a terrible mistake in front of Iori earlier. Was it really the right thing to do? Did she do anything wrong...?

"Hey, Kiriyama."

After a while, Taichi spoke while looking at Yui straight in the eyes. His were a pair of straightforward and honest eyes, Yui thought she was almost mesmerized... Hold on, it was not the 'love' sort of like. Nope.

"Let's do our best together."

*Ahh, I see. Taichi understood too.*

Not having someone to strive for your sake, and not striving on your own either, but rather having everyone to strive together.

This is the true form of companionship.

Kiriyama Yui believed as such.

"Let's do our best together."

If Taichi... If she had companions who were willing to work hard together with her, Yui, too, would be able to strive hard.

"I don't understand Nagase right now at all, Not to mention the current situation around her, it was as though she wished for it to happen... But still, I can't leave her alone like that."

"I don't know what to do for Iori either, not to mention if I interfered too much, it has the potential to turn even uglier. But... let's do our best anyway."

Yui concluded, to which Taichi smiled happily at.

Yui smiled in return.

"I thought I was powerless after being rejected... You're right though, there's nothing we couldn't do!"

Hearing Taichi say that, Yui was very happy. She nodded her head sharply in agreement and said:

"Yup!"

[ *Yui~ I'm almost there~* ]

Aoki's 'Sentiment Transmission' finally came.

...*You're too slow!*

□■□■□

Things refused to go smoothly since the morning.

As soon as I arrived at school, I found my desk scrawled all over. It was easy to clean up, so it wasn't much of a problem. But as I was cleaning,

nobody tried to help. It seemed they did not want to get involved. If Taichi or Inaba were here, it might have been a different scene.

Not to mention, I had a fight with my mother in the morning, and broke my favorite hair disc. Combining with these external factors, I felt like I'd hit the rock bottom. My mood could not get any worse.

Needless to say, it is exactly days like this that trouble would choose to find you.

*[ I can't be the only one running away now. They were all striving their best, I too should—— ]*

At noon, I heard the inner voice of Inaba Himeko. And after school, Inaba walked straight at me.

*Can you pick any worse timing than this?* I thought.

I was beyond moody; my state of mind was shrouded in complete darkness and melancholy.

"Iori, can you tell me what's going on already? It has gone past the point where I could turn a blind eye on you, you know."

"Then, why have you waited till now to ask me?"

I asked. She startled.

I did not want to talk to her like that.

Yet I could no longer stop myself from doing that.

From that one statement of mine alone, Inaba's eyes wavered.

Inaba did not seem to have a plan beforehand. There was a hesitant air around her, perhaps Inaba was in her 'weak' state.

"...I can't blame you for saying that. I'm sorry. I didn't know what to do either. I've asked myself, what can I do in this situation? Not to mention, you've changed so much..."

Changed so much.

Changed.

No, I had changed.

I spoke:

"Sure, what are you gonna do then?"

Why did I choose to speak like that? Normal people would not do that. I could not even be normal any more.

"Iori, can you tell me? What you really think?"

Inaba clenched her teeth, and pursued.

"...Even if I don't tell you, 'Sentiment Transmission' will send my thoughts to you anyway."

"Those are only glimpses of our thoughts, not the whole picture. I can't tell the truth with these fragments alone. So please, can you tell me everything?"

"Why must I tell Inaba everything?"

"...!"

Inaba's face paled from shock. She was beginning to break. Indeed, she was weak. Too weak. It was painful to watch. Too painful.

Inaba, her eyes wavered and filled with tears, shook her head. Was she trying to pretend she didn't hear those words just now? Was she trying to stand up once more?

"Iori... You've saved me before, hence I want to save you too. 'Save' might sound a little pretentious, but even so..."

Inaba clenched her fist.

"We are friends, aren't we? Friends should help each other right? You don't have to worry, we can help you!"

"Stop imposing your ideals on me."

I replied flatly.

"Imposing... what do you mean by that? You should know—"

Inaba's voice began to fill with anger.

"'You should know'... Isn't that exactly what imposing means?"

"W—What happened to you!? You weren't the type of people who would say that! You would be more... You wouldn't be like this at all!"

Not the type of people who would say that.

Not like this at all.

Not like this.

I could no longer display the side that wasn't like that.

No longer. No more.

Inaba became very emotional.

"Something is really wrong with you, you know that!? You've been acting like this since you rejected Taichi! I know it's hard to keep a common heart in face of the 'Sentiment Transmission' phenomenon. I'm scared too! I feel painful, tired, helpless... But why!? Besides, did you have to reject Taichi? Didn't you like Taichi too—"

*Like I said, that's called—*

[ *Imposing.* ]

"...Eh?"

Inaba uttered a sound of puzzlement.

This was my 'Sentiment Transmission' to Inaba.

Dark and murky feelings began to surge within me.

*If Inaba wants everything from me, then I'll give it to her.*

I ignored the voice in my head *This is just hateful venting*, and said:

"Aren't you the one being absurd here? You hooked me up with Taichi, forced us to notice each other."

My words pierced through her like a dagger.

"You kept nagging about pairing us together. Then when I actually wanted to take on the relationship, you went 'I love him too' and joined in."

"Ah... Ah..."

Inaba trembled. She held herself tight, as though consumed by a dreadful chill.

"But as soon as I said I don't want to go out with Taichi, you started fussing again. What were you trying to do? What did you want?"

I ignored my own actions, and continued:

"Can you be any more irresponsible? You stirred with my feelings, then butt in and interfered, and made everything a mess. Have you ever considered my feelings? What were you thinking?"

How was I able to speak those words so casually? I felt I was the most terrible person in the world.

Inaba finally broke, and collapsed on her knee.

[ *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry...* ]

I could hear Inaba's voice.

Regrets. Remorse. Guilt. Self-reproach. Apology. Apology. Apology.

Inaba's feelings flowed into me.

It was painful, agonizing, sorrowful. My chest was going to rip. I wanted to comfort her and say "It's alright."

But I would not say it. I could no longer say it. The current me was unable to say it.

A sentiment suddenly came to me. It was from Yaegashi Taichi, who was not present at the scene.

[ *I am not alone, I must do my best for Nagase's sake.* ]

So passionate. So bright. So dignified.

For me, however, it was very painful and agonizing.

*Please, stop it.* I whispered in my heart.

I was not resolved. I was not worthy.

## Chapter 6 - The Realization of Inaba Himeko

—*I want to die.*

She kept wanting to say that.

*No, I shouldn't be saying that, not even as a joke,* Inaba Himeko admonished herself.

She had been stuck in a spiral of negative train of thoughts yesterday, and those thoughts underwent 'Sentiment Transmission,' which brought both her and the others a lot of trouble (Taichi especially, after hearing her 'Sentiment Transmission,' ran straight to Inaba's house, causing quite a bit of stir.)

She jumped at the call with arrogance, a halfhearted resolution, plus a 'things will work out' kind of self-indulging sense of duty, and earned herself a bitter taste of retribution in the end.

Inaba reminisced about what Iori said to her yesterday.

She thought she knew how irresponsible she had been herself.

She thought she was all prepared to carry the brand of her sin and move on forward.

Yet, she took this heavy of a blow from simply being reprimanded by Iori. She was not able to bear the consequences of her own actions after all.

She was naive; she thought she understood everything.

Because Iori had told her to do so before... No, she mustn't put the blame on others.

Since she had fallen in love, she could not help it; it meant everything, so she could be forgiven—Things like those often seen in movies or dramas were all time favorite among girls. However, they simply do not work in reality.

Inaba reminisced about Iori's delicate, yet expressionless, doll-like face.

—*Imposing.*

What had she imposed on Iori?

There was an enormous gap between the image of 'Nagase Iori' she had drawn in her heart and that of Iori at the present.

What was the latent meaning behind this contrast?

Everything built up until now had fallen apart. What remained were...

"Inaba! Quit slacking! Club activities will be banned starting from tomorrow until three days before the exams, so we have to finish our presentation preparations today!"

"That's right, Inaba-chan! I wanted to study too! If I flunked the finals it'd be all your fault, Inaba-chan!"

"...That would be your own fault wouldn't it?"

"Taichi! Stop being so serious~ You're supposed to say 'It's Saturday yet we are out here working' after me~!"

"Er... It's Saturday yet we are out here working."

"Yup, that's the spirit. Good job, good job!"

"Stop fooling around you two! Don't forget there's only four of us here, we'll fall behind schedule if you keep this up!"

"Yes, Yui."

"My bad, Kiriyama."

"Good. By the way Aoki, even if you study hard for one night, your grades won't improve."

"You don't have to be so mean!"

"You reap what you sow."

"Taichi you don't have to rub it against my face either!"

"Even if you ended up being my kouhai... Ahem."

"D—Don't jinx me like that! Haha... Ha... AHHH~~ I'm scared now! I don't wanna repeat year one again!"

*...These guys are so noisy.*

"You too, Inaba. Are you still spacing out?"

"Oh, right... Sorry."

As Yui called her out, Inaba continued her suspended work.

"...No matter how stupid you are, if you repeat the year again, you would still be able to promote. So no need to fret."

"Inaba-chan is already treating my repeating the year as a given!? And besides, when Yui said 'You too, Inaba,' I didn't think she meant to ask you to join up and open fire at me!"

After making fun of Aoki, Inaba managed to get herself back to her usual pace.

The preparation for their club presentation had entered the final stage. They had completed making the paper vellum for their oral report, and the amount of sheets easily exceeded ten. If they spread out the vellum sheets, they could easily take up the entire club room and have many left overs. Not to mention, the vellum sheets weren't only written with simple text. The title text and color were treated with extra care as well. The final product was so detailed, one couldn't help but to gasp in awe. In addition to all of those, Yui, who became unusually finicky on the way, started adding all kinds of illustrations. Thanks to these illustrations, the paper vellum felt much more engaging to look at. Inaba was deeply impressed at their own progress.

With this quality, and the amount of information they had collected (they didn't think they could finish introducing all of them under fifteen minutes,) they should be able to leave an impression that could rival the Jazz Band's. In fact, Inaba could even say that, since no other club would go that far to collect these information, the judges' evaluation would probably tip towards the CRC's favor.

They had it in the bag, Inaba reckoned.

Her plan was devised for a guaranteed victory to begin with, but what was more important to her, was that they were able to work together.

For a concluding piece of their year-worth of club activities, this was an admirable feat.

Hereafter, they would be rehearsing their oral report individually, and then proceed to group rehearsing after the exams, and set foot on the stage at the end.

It was worth mentioning that, their oral report was to be carried out by five person. Although Inaba resisted the idea, she also prepared a four-person version.

She isn't here now, but when they go on stage, Lori will show up—as much as Inaba wanted to believe that, the presentation event would not allow them any leisure, hence she must be prepared for any situation.

*...Wonder what Lori's doing now.*

"Inaba, it'll be alright."

Taichi said to her in a volume that only she could hear.

Inaba was startled for a moment. She thought the 'Sentiment Transmission' phenomenon had triggered, but it turned out not the case. Taichi merely guessed her feelings from observing her look.

"Thank you."

Inaba replied softly, and focused her eyes back on her work.

*Ah, it feels warm.* She thought.

It was so warm, she wanted to lean towards it.

But... would she be allowed to do such thing?

Lori could still be suffering at the moment.

Inaba thought she knew Lori better than anyone.

But now, she was not able to reach out to Lori's feelings at all.

It was all because of Lori that she was able to come to where she was at the present. Without Lori, she would still be morose and shutting herself alone in the dark. It was also with Lori's help, that Inaba was able to make many more friends in class.

*—They would continue to be friends,* Lori had said that to her.

*—Their friendship would not be destroyed just because they were competing for the same guy,* Lori had said that to her.

Which part was right? Which part was wrong?

Or was it in fact, it used to be right but now it is wrong?

If this was the case, it would be too sad. Too, very sad.

Inaba realised how much Lori meant to her.

It was always when things were already too late, that she would realise her own feelings. It had always been like that for her.

As a result, she had hurt the very people and things she treasured.

She could never stop regretting. Was there any way for her to atone for her sins? Could things returned to where they were?

If she gave up Taichi, and returned to where she was when she watched over Lori and Taichi slowly coming together... Thoughts that must not be thought emerged in Inaba's mind.

—*Kacha*. The club room door opened.

Inaba's heart jumped for a moment.

*Did she come?*

Lori, the president of the CRC, came to help with the preparation of the—

—

"Yo~ You guys working hard?"

The face of Gotou Ryuuzen, the class 1C homeroom teacher as well as the CRC's club advisor, popped up from behind the door.

Inaba felt a chill for a moment for a certain other reason, but Gotou's eyes were normal, and there were no sign of any absurd sluggishness. It was not the certain jerk who loved Gotou's body, just the normal Gotou.

Even so, he was not the one Inaba hoped to see.

"Ah, ahh, it's Go-san... Thank goodness."

Yui let out a sigh of relief.

"What, Kiriyma? Are you that happy to see me? You're a cute one aren't you."

"C—Cute... Hehe, you say cute, I'm not that... Weird. How come I don't feel at all happy when Go-san compliments me? Is it because Go-san is bald?"

"Oi oi, no matter how you think of it, this has nothing to do with being bald! And besides, I am not bald, I just got a wider forehead than other people! You heard me!? Oi!"

It was her first time seeing Gotou flipping, it would seem that the word 'bald' was a taboo for him. Inaba figured she would add it to her dictionary (Gotou only) should she need to bully him.

She find herself having the leisure to contemplate on pointless things like that now. Apparently she could relief some stress by watching idiots doing idiotic things; she had also switched back to her 'outward mode.'

"Oi, Inaba, you wouldn't happen to be... thinking about treating me like an idiot right?"

"Get out."

"Why am I being told off just for trying to verify whether I'm being told off!?"

"Anyway, it's kind of rare to see Go-san visiting the club room."

Taichi said, to which Yui and Aoki continued after:

"Wait, isn't this the first time that's ever happened!?"

"It's a miracle!"

"For an advisor, this is a dereliction of duty."

Inaba muttered tiredly.

"What nonsense, I'm here for real now. Isn't that amazing?"

"That's nothing to be proud of!"

"In the end, what are you doing here, Go-san?" Aoki inquired.

"Oh, right right, here."

Gotou put a bag with five cans of soda on the table.

"You guys seem to be working very hard. This is for cheering you guys."

"Yay~~" Everyone cheered.

"But how should I say it... It's gonna be tough if you guys want to beat the Jazz Club."

His tone was serious and very teacher-like. Gotou did seem to think it would be very difficult for the CRC to win.

"That being said, I have good faith on you. Believe it or not, bystanders will always feel the ones who are fighting hard, and will always reach out for them."

Bystanders will feel the ones who are fighting hard.

As long as you work hard, someone will reach out for you.

Inaba believed these two notions to be very important.

"Go-san, you... you really are a teacher!"

Yui said as though she was impressed.

"I guess this does happen sometimes..."

"This is probably the first time I've seen Go-san behaving like a teacher."

Taichi and Aoki gave their thought as well.

"What have you been seeing me as all these time!? Ahh, I see, have you been seeing me a cool and admirable brother figure? This is embarrassing~"

"Your optimism is really something ain't it!"

Inaba jabbed. She was glad that she wasn't alone, but together with everyone.

"Hm? I thought I felt something missing in here, turns out to be Nagase after all. Is she out to the bathroom or something?"

[ *It's cold today too.* ]

It was Lori's 'Sentiment Transmission'.

If only Lori was here too. It would've been perfect then.

□■□■□

The weekend passed. The scene shifted to Monday in school. Inaba arrived at the classroom earlier than usual.

The finals that spans from Wednesday to Friday were imminent.

The exam scope was wide. Inaba, too, knew she should get on seriously, yet she was not able to make any progress in her studies. Even though she wasn't exactly going to get a horrible grade, she might run the risk of a drop in her rankings.

About two-thirds of the students had already arrived at their classrooms in school. Lively chattering unique to the morning could be heard around the place.

"How long did you study yesterday?" "...Zip. I've been busy with club activities all these time, it's seldom that I get a break... It's only making me wanna slack off and have fun you know..." "Eh~ Then you didn't finish

your practice questions? Didn't you say you were gonna finish them yesterday?" "And who's fault was that? You're the one who called me and ended up chatting all day!"

Students were chatting about their studies everywhere. It was a common sight before exams.

However, exams weren't the only thing being discussed in the classroom.

"Watase, how did your 'Even though you did not receive chocolate on Valentine's Day, you're still gonna gift something to Fujishima-san, in order to invite her for a date' plan go?" "Shush, you're too loud... Er, about that, Fujishima-san seemed to be busy with this 'Guys who received chocolate yet too wimpy to show their resolve should all be spanked' mission that day..."

There were stupid conversations.

"Lemme tell you~ I bumped into Fujishima-san walking her dog last night. Her dog is a bull dog, it's super cute~" "Eh? I don't think bull dogs are cute..." "I can't pretend I didn't hear that!" "F—Fujishima-san!?"

And there were girly conversations. Got to say though, Fujishima Maiko was certainly popular.

[ *I'm gonna be late! Dash dash dash! Ack, red light! Don't dash!* ]

It was Aoki's inner voice.

The fact that even these panicky sentiment of his were sent to her was extremely irritating. Inaba found it disruptive from the bottom of her gut.

And then, as she was listening to the chatters—

"I've always been wondering, is Lori really born like that? For a sweet person she does seem a little too perfect, feels a little fake. I kept thinking that it was probably an act..."

"To be honest, a girl who's cheerful and lively and a little nutty... I didn't think such a person would exist..."

"The rumours about her deceiving guys... Judging by how she's acting right now, maybe they're true after all..."

Without realising, Inaba caught wind of such conversations.

Suddenly, she found her eyes meeting with one of the girls talking about Lori.

Inaba quickly averted her eyes forward and returned to her seat. She took out a dictionary. She wasn't exactly looking up anything, but she pretended to be in order to continue listen to the conversations in the class.

The criticism against Lori continued to spread throughout the class.

It was not a dramatic shift, but it was steadily spreading, like a dye would on a piece of cloth.

*Is it too late for Lori to go back?*

Inaba refused to believe that, but, she did not know what she could do.

She deeply realised how powerless she was.

She began to mock herself.

What did she mean by, her hobby was to collect and analyze data?

What did she mean by, her motto was to completely keep hold of the situation and—

"Everyone, listen to me!"

A familiar voice echoed in the classroom. Inaba lifted her head and looked towards the source.

Yaegashi Taichi was standing before the podium.

His expression was resolute, as though saying he was about to march to the battlefield.

Inaba was familiar with that look. She had seen it several times before.

But why? Instead of anticipation... she had this bad feeling stirring within her.

Now that she thought of it, Yui sent her a message in the morning which said "I've received one of Taichi's 'Sentiment Transmission,' he seems to be up to something. Be careful." Should she have been more attentive?

There were still a few students who hadn't arrived in class yet. Taichi's voice echoed loudly through out the classroom.

Watase jeered "What's with you today, Yaegashi" at the start, but upon seeing Taichi's unusually serious look, everyone in class went silent.

"I was going to formally explain this to everyone afterwards, but I wanted to say this now."

*What trouble is he trying to cause this time?*

"I think everyone might have known this already, Nagase has been acting strangely lately, and there's been odd rumours about Nagase spreading around."

*I could have guessed, but is that what this is about in the end?*

Inaba peered around the classroom—lori had not arrived at school yet.

"I think it's more truth than rumours though! Is it not?"

A loud voice sounded from the center of the room.

It was Setouchi Kaoru. She was a slightly-misbehaved delinquent, and seemed to be the one responsible for stirring the class and spreading the negative rumours about lori.

Taichi looked towards Setouchi.

They stared at each other, and created a few seconds of silence.

Then, Taichi looked away, peered around the classroom and said:

"I haven't really grasp the exact content of the rumours, so I have no idea what everyone have heard. But I want to say this first, I'd like to ask everyone not to blindly believe rumours."

"I think that's personal freedom though, is it not?"

Setouchi questioned in a haughty tone.

"Yes, just as you said. Which is why I'd like to ask everyone to judge on their own whether those rumours are true or not."

Taichi replied without a shred of hesitation. Once he found his resolve, there would be nothing able to deter him, as expected from Taichi.

Discussion began to spread among the class. Students who arrived after Taichi began his speech went "Eh, what's going on?" and asked others for details.

The mood in the class underwent an apparent change from Taichi's words. After all, people had never disliked lori to begin with, that and the fact they had been classmates the whole year, it was only natural that they would come to the conclusion that 'lori is a good person.'

Inaba knew this very well.

In fact, she could be the one standing on the podium, and not Taichi.

Yet, she did not do so as such, and did not plan to do so.

Because she feared that should she fail, she would risk suffering from the backlash.

Inaba was reknown for her arrogant demeanour, as well as her blunt way of speech; on the other hand, she was extremely cautious, avoiding every situation that would risk making enemies.

Under certain circumstances, the school could become a merciless field. One small emotional dispute could be enough to turn everyone against her. This was why Inaba was afraid. Taichi probably knew this fact as well.

Even so, Taichi stood up at the podium.

Who was he doing it for?

He did it for Nagase Iori, the very person who rejected him.

"...Truth or not, just look at how Nagase's acting now. Don't you think the answer's obvious?"

Setouchi's words had turned the opinions in a different direction once more. Inaba could feel it easily from the air. "She has a point..." "That does seem a little..." "...The shift in personality is too great," she could hear comments like that.

Indeed, that was the most definitive reason why Inaba was ultimately unable to make that step.

If Iori didn't do anything yet rumours began to spread, Inaba would have refuted them right away.

However, Iori had been acting unusually cold towards everyone around her. She had shut herself out from everyone, as though nodding towards the negative rumours about her.

No matter what others might say, if she was acting like that to begin with, and showed no intention of denying, there was nothing Inaba could do at all.

"There is a reason for that."

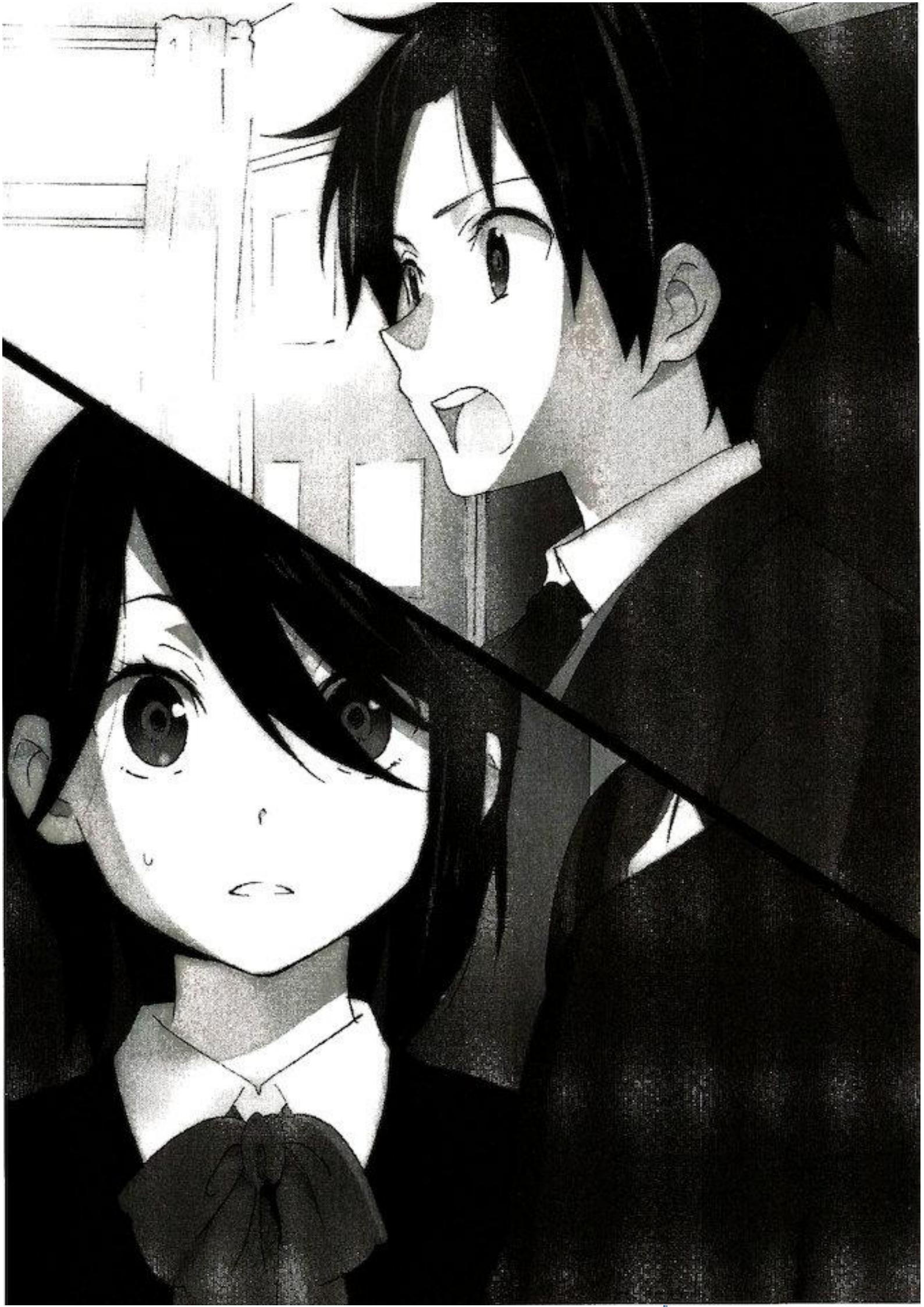
Reason? Did Taichi find out the reason somewhere along the way?

"Oh? What is it?"

Setouchi asked in a grating tone.

"The truth is..."

Taichi did not continue, and bit his lips instead. The audience could feel his anxiety as well. The tension in the class increased. What kind of shocking reason would Taichi give?



"I... I love Nagase!"

*WHAT IS THIS GUY TALKING ABOUT ALL OF THE SUDDEN?*<sup>[4]</sup>

Everyone else in the class froze.

But Taichi did not mind it, and continued:

"So I tried be forceful on Nagase... several times. Like... very forceful, indescribably forceful."

*...Since when did that ever happen?*

Nobody stopped Taichi from continuing.

"And honestly... I went overboard, very overboard, extremely overboard."

Taichi clenched his fist, and said in a determined tone:

"It's overboard to the point that... it was shocking!"

The girls around began to look wary towards Taichi, and some boy muttered "Where did this hero come from?" in the back.

"And then, because I went overboard... Nagase seemed to have lost her faith in humanity!"

*Inaba himeko has always believed this man to be an idiot and today she is able to confirm it once more. This man is an idiot. A freaking idiot. Fuck you.*<sup>[5]</sup>

...Ah. Her brain had deteriorated to a state of moronity from the shock. Astonishing.

*In front of the whole class, with such a loud volume, with this open and aboveboard attitude, this man, what on earth does he think he is talking about?*

"In other words, the reason Nagase became like that, is all because of me. Nagase is not at fault!"

[ *Even though it was a big fat lie!* ]

[ *It better be!* ]

Inaba managed to reply Taichi's 'Sentiment Transmission' with her own 'Sentiment Transmission.' What was that about?

"In other words..." "If this is true..." "This doesn't sound like a joke..."

The class began to stir, and was gradually spreading. It was only natural.

"Could it be harass— ...Mmph!" "D—Don't say it!"

The uproar was beginning to go out of control, like the surging wave on the sea.

"Th—That can't be possible right, I mean, he wouldn't go as far as harass..."

The wave of controversy developed into a raging wave in the storm. Taichi began to panic.

"Ah, hello Dad? Seems there's a criminal in my class, can you lend a couple people here?"

Fujishima even called her father who was allegedly a high-ranked officer of the police force.

"Eh? I didn't do anything illegal... Oh, what's wrong, Inaba?"

Before she realised it herself, Inaba had already walked up to Taichi.

"At least be a little more mindful of the consequences before you act, you idiot!"

"Oomph!"

Inaba smashed her fist into Taichi's stomach with every ounce of strength she could muster and dragged him out towards the club room.

□■□■□

Luckily, it was study period, so Inaba decided to skip the first class. Needless to say, Taichi was coerced to do the same.

When the teacher came to take attendance before the class starts, Inaba used "This guy's having a stomach ache, I'm taking him to the nurse's office" as an excuse (which wasn't exactly a lie,) and told the class that "Most of what Yaegashi Taichi said just now were completely made up, please don't believe him. I'll explain the details later." She also convinced Fujishima and averted the crisis of having Taichi arrested on spot.

"Inaba-san... the floor is cold."

"Shut up."

Inaba was sitting on the chair and looking down at Taichi, who was sitting in seiza on the club room floor.

"Well then, explain yourself. What was the meaning of that back there?"

Inaba inquired Taichi. Her voice was trembling in rage.

"..."

But Taichi remained still and silent.

"...Oi, what are you being so quiet for? Hurry up and answer me."

"Eh... That's because Inaba told me to shut up..."

"Don't give me that grade-schooler's bull crap! What are you, stupid!? You're actually stupid aren't you!?"

"N—No, I mean, if it were Inaba, she would probably render me powerless first and then start hurling an endless row of abuse at me or something like that..."

"I was NOT about to employ that kind of 'play'!"

"...You weren't?"

"What are you looking so disappointed for!?"

*So that was your wish, was it!? I can give it to you you know! ...Oops, off topic!*

Inaba sighed and paused briefly.

"Anyway, what you did back there, what on earth was that about?"

"...First things first, I was only feeling relieved just now. I was not feeling disappointed or anything, okay?"

"Okay I get it, hurry up and answer my question."

*It's alright, Taichi, I've already marked you as a masochist. I'll make sure to do some research on being a sadist for—*

.....

—Ahem. Inaba cleared her throat and switched her brain back to serious mode.

"Uh, I was trying to mitigate those strange rumours about Nagase..."

"The first half of your speech was fine, and your point about 'not to blindly believe rumours' was entirely correct... In fact, I should be the one to be criticized for turning a blind eye on the whole situation. But the problem lies within the latter half of your speech, what's with that made up excuse at the end?"

"I wanted to clear up the misunderstanding towards Nagase, but I couldn't find any way to deal with her attitude at the moment."

"That I understand."

"So I thought, if Nagase became like that due to certain external factors, then people wouldn't be too harsh on her."

"That too I understand."

"But since we can't mention anything about «Heartseed», I thought I would make up some sensible sort of external factor instead."

"Sounds logical."

"So the idea that came to me was that, I went overly aggressive on my pursue for Nagase which caused her to—"

"How on earth did it come to this from there? Why did you throw yourself into the pit like that?"

Taichi's reputation in class was crashing in an incredible momentum. What on earth was he thinking?

"I can't think of any other ideas though. It might be impolite to say it, but I did come up with something along the lines of family emergency... However, should Nagase deny it herself, then it'd be all in vain. But if I tell them that something like 'I forced upon her,' then even if Nagase denied it, people are less likely to buy into her."

*I see, that does seem to make sense. But...*

"That's still too risky though... If you tell people that you harassed Lori, you would deeply hurt Lori too..."

"This you must allow me to object! I've never said anything like 'I harassed her,' I did not mean it that way!"

"Well, I can't say it's surprising coming from you. However, your execution is terrible; your words can easily be taken the wrong way you know."

"I had to emphasize the blame on me in order for everyone to believe me though..." Taichi muttered dejectedly.

Inaba understood well. This man before her did not feel dejected merely from of being mistaken. He was also deeply regretting that his action might have ended up hurting others. This 'self-sacrificing spirit' of Taichi's was something Inaba was madly fuming about all the time. But at the same time, it was also something she was madly in love for.

"That being said, even though the whole mistaking of 'your harassing Iori' was an unexpected outcome, you were planning to divert all the criticism upon yourself to begin with, am I correct? Don't you think that would merely change the subject of antagonism to a different person, and not solve the problem?"

*Say something like you merely wanted to carry the pain for others, and I will beat you into a pulp.*

"...Concerning Nagase being 'like that' at the moment, while I'm sure 'Sentiment Transmission' was a major part of the cause, I think the rumours and people's harping on them added to it as well. If I remove one of these factors, then Nagase would be able to recover more quickly, right? Luckily for me, 'Sentiment Transmission' did not affect me enough to be a concern, so I thought I would have enough leisure to absorb some of the blow for Nagase..."

*...Sounded a bit flimsy, but reasonable enough for me to buy it I guess. Be glad that you're still alive, Taichi.*

"And besides, once it's all over, we can just explain it to others. I'm sure things will turn out fine in the end."

*Aren't you a confident one. Oi.*

For Inaba, who tended to worry a lot and not able to trust others completely, such confidence was something she would never have.

"...I'll help clean up the mess with you after this. I must say though, I was thinking in relief earlier that you were restraining yourself for the right time to act, but I'd never expected that, as soon as you act, you'd charge right into the center of the heat."

"Kiriyama told me that I'd normally be 'more persevering,' so I gave it a thought, and came to think that that feel to act is important too..."

*Yui... that dolt. I'm going to have a little chat with her after this.*

"Ki—Kiriyama didn't do anything wrong."

"Hm? I didn't trigger 'Sentiment Transmission' just now, did I?"

*I must have shown a vicious look on my face. Self-restrain, self-restrain.*

"Anyway, from this point on, if you're going to do something stupid like this again, talk to me first! Understood?! ...Really understood?!"

For the sake of the stupid man before her, Inaba insisted repeatedly.

"Yes ma'am..."

Taichi replied with an obedient look on his face. He seemed to be reflecting, Inaba figured she would let him off for now.

"By the way..." Inaba spoke again.

"What?"

"How long are you gonna keep up with that seiza on the icy floor? The weather's freezing as hell you know."

"You should have told me earlier if you didn't need me to sit!"

*Such an obedient guy, she thought. An unknown, strange fetish that stirred within her was awak— ...No no no, nothing was awaken, nothing was awaken!*

□■□■□

"—That's about it, this guy's speech was to divert everyone's negativity away from Iori, hence the bunch of nonsense he pulled."

Inaba said, while Taichi bowed and apologized next to her.

"I'm really sorry, I caused a commotion with my lies, I hope you can pretend it never happened."

The two were carrying out the plan Inaba suggested—sincerely explain to each of their classmates in order to earn their understanding.

"...Then, what's the reason behind Iori looking so down or acting so coldly?"

One of the two girls inquired after both listening to Inaba and Taichi's explanation.

"About that, I can't explain it right now... This might sound selfish, but I hope you would believe that Lori is not a bad person at heart. You will understand it one day, so until then..."

Taichi continued after Inaba:

"She is someone I would defend even at the cost of what I did back there—she's worth that much for us, I hope you can take this as part of your consideration."

As they finished, the two girls looked at each other briefly.

Then, they soften their expression:

"Mm~ I figured as much~ Yaegashi-kun isn't that type of person after all."

"So it was only a lie after all. Thank goodness. Our image of Yaegashi-kun still lives!"

They did not take any dramatic measure, and merely used the most straightforward and honest approach, yet it was surprisingly effective and comforting.

"Hmm I still don't quite understand what's going on with Lori though... But I'm sure there's a reason for that. We'll just need to watch over her with a warm heart, is that right?"

"We have both Yaegashi-kun and Inaba-san saying this to us after all... And besides, I know Lori isn't a bad person at heart."

Upon seeing the their benignancy, Inaba felt her heart at ease.

After another brief moment of conversation, the two girls said "See ya," and left the classroom.

Thus concluding Inaba and Taichi's operation to explain to the class. They didn't think it would be a good idea to let Lori or Setouchi hear them, hence the two explained secretly and individually to the rest of the class. They had to spend a lot of time for that, but they managed to complete their objective before the end of classes.

Thanks to that Taichi's ridiculous speech earlier plus Inaba and Taichi's effort together in explaining, the atmosphere towards Lori in class had shown an apparent improvement. They probably did not even need

Taichi's speech to begin with. Inaba figured their sincere request towards the class would have sufficed.

It was so simple, Inaba was shocked at why she did not make the move at the beginning.

Truth to be told, she already knew the reason herself.

It takes courage to make the first step.

That was something that can be easily achieved once she made the first step. However, even though she was aware of such, if there was no guarantee in succeeding, and if it was accompanied by risk, it was difficult for her to make such a step.

Especially for someone like her, who would always end up thinking towards the worst yet unlikely outcome—in this case, being shunned by her classmates, it was made even more difficult for her to act.

However, this man had the courage to make that step.

Though whenever he decided to do so, it would always end up as a huge but thoughtless, reckless step. That was one little drawback of his.

"...Now that I think of it, we should have done this right at the beginning."

Taichi seemed to have realised it as well.

"Which is why you should remember to talk to me first next time."

"Yes ma'am... Sigh, I'm useless in the end after all... If Inaba you didn't help me I would've been done for..."

His awe-inspiring momentum during his speech on the podium had disappeared without a trace.

"But it was all because of you taking the first step that I was able to follow suit. It's because there was two of us..."

As she was speaking, Inaba realised.

Taichi's impulsiveness and her own discreetness joint together and formed a combination.

It wasn't so bad of a combination after all, she thought.

They complemented each other's flaw and added to each other's strength.

She felt she was able to do many more things.

Was this the meaning behind people's connection with each other? This thought came up in Inaba's mind.

"The two of you are getting along very nicely lately."

"Huh!?" "Whaa!?"

A voice sounded behind them and the two spun around in surprised, and found Fujishima Maiko, the class representative of class 1C, standing there.

"Thanks for your hard work. I was going to fear for the worst earlier. But as expected from Inaba-san and Yaegashi-kun, you handled it beautifully."

Fujishima lifted her glasses with her finger and commended the two.

"Fujishima... Now that you mention it, why didn't you do anything? You must have noticed the mood centering around Iori worsening in the class, right? Normally you would be the first one to act..."

Inaba asked. She had thought it was unusual since before.

"I was quite troubled too. I thought I shouldn't meddle in too much, and would be better to watch over everyone's growth as a class rep."

"...Why are you perceiving it like a mother would watching over her children?"

Taichi jabbed under his breath.

"To lead everyone forward and not deprive the opportunity of individual growth... Such is an important lesson for me from now on."

"Just what kind of goal is that suppose to be?"

Inaba couldn't help but to jab along.

"Though, I'd never expected things to turn out this bad. I know it might be too late to ask, but do you need my help?"

Upon hearing that question, Taichi peeked at Inaba's face.

Inaba hesitated a little, and—

"Nah."

She answered that.

[ *Is there anything the two of us can't do?* ]

"...I can think of quite a few."

Inaba kicked at the dense and awful-at-reading-atmosphere guy next to her and sent him flying.

Inaba and Taichi walked side by side on the field. Since club activities were banned before the finals, the field was spacious and empty.

Inaba suddenly remembered something, and asked:

"By the way, didn't you say before that you felt agonized because you were too sensitive of other's pain? In that case, would taking the pain directly like this okay for you?"

"...It's fine, because I understand the actual pain was merely that much. After all, I used to think that if I took up the pain myself, I would understand it better, which was how I ended up the 'selfless freak' you guys keep talking about..."

Base on the meaning of that, the 'Sentiment Transmission' phenomenon was probably a good thing for Taichi.

"Is that so. By the way, why did you add 'used to' in your sentence on your own as if it was in the past? You're still the same."

*Do you mind not reviving Taichi's crazy self-sacrificing spirit, «Heartseed»? Just as he was beginning to behave himself too.*

"You really are hopeless without someone like me keeping an eye on you, aren't you?"

"Haha, it's possible. I'm gonna need to ask you to keep a good eye on me now, don't I."

"Oh, sure."

Soon afterwards, Inaba blushed over what she said. She felt that the conversation just now... was like something between couples would have. She didn't mean to build up that kind of atmosphere, so she was deeply embarrassed.

And then Inaba realised one thing.

She could be mistaken. She could be illuding herself. She could be imagining things from her desire. She could be self-indulging and making false assumptions.

But, could it be that... Taichi needed her too?

Just as how she needed Taichi.

Inaba had this mild feeling.

She knew she loved Taichi, but Taichi had chosen Iori before, thus she did not know what to do, and felt distressed. But objectively speaking, having two people supporting each other was actually a good thing. And if the fact of the two of them being together does not only fulfill her desire, but also benefit Taichi—

*[ What does it mean to 'fall in love with a person'? What does it mean to 'go out with a person'? ]*

"Uhhhh!?"

Taichi's 'Sentiment Transmission' caused Inaba to cry out in surprise; the strange gazes she attracted from around her made her feel very uneasy.

"Uh... That was... I was just thinking of something..."

Taichi explained in panic.

Inaba felt her heart pounding.

Her heart sped faster than usual.

It couldn't be due to 'Sentiment Transmission,' that she was able to feel Taichi's heartbeat, could it?

Taichi's heartbeat, mixed together with her own feelings, Inaba began to lose track of what was going on.

*[ I could equate myself to being told by Nagase that she doesn't need me, but does Inaba need me? ]*

"Ho—Hoh!?"

She made a weird shriek. Those gazes around, they stung. She wanted to dig a hole and hide in it.

"Guh... Again! Did we just enter 'Sentiment Transmission's' high frequency zone!?"

"I—I know right, haha..."

Inaba pretended to be calm and replied.

That being said, she figured she should answer Taichi's question.

"I... need you very much, you know..."

It was a soft and timid tone.

"Eh... Ahh... Thank you."

As though embarrassed, Taichi blushed and avoided her eyes.

*...Do I look really embarrassed right now?* Inaba wondered.

*I can't believe I said words like 'I need you very much'...*

*Words like that...*

*Words like that.....*

*.....It's too embarrassing!*

Her cheeks were hot, as though boiling. Was her face completely red now? It was embarrassing. Inaba tried to hide her face behind her scarf, but couldn't. She wanted to cry.

She felt... Perhaps she was too embarrassed, she seemed to going numb.

Her thoughts were becoming embarrassingly bold.

*Stop.* She could hear her composed self telling her that from far away. But she ignored it. *Yes, ignore it. Listen. Listen to yourself. You want to listen now. So listen.*

Inaba placed her fingers in her scarf.

She then pulled her scarf down a little, revealing her mouth so that she could speak clearly.

"Am I... Am I needed for you?"

As she said it, the entire world fell silent. Noises, chatters, and even the sounds of her own heartbeat, faded away without a trace.

Did she just asked a really astounding question?

Inaba wasn't sure if this question was significant to others. But for her, it was extremely important.

Was the question necessary?

It seemed to weigh a lot heavier than 'Do you love me.'

If she was rejected, if she was told that she was 'not needed,' what should she do?

Taichi spoke:

"You are, of course... needed."

Her heart stopped.

Her mind went blank.

And then, Inaba finally understood what those words meant.

*Ahh. Are you trying to make me die from joy? You jerk.*

□■□■□

*What on earth are we doing in the middle of the road*— As the two came back to their senses, they hurried and parted their respective way home.

After confirmation, it seemed some of Taichi's 'Sentiment Transmission' were forwarded to Yui and Aoki as well. Thankfully none were forwarded to lori.

Inaba contemplated.

—Nagase lori.

She was her classmate, her club mate, and a friend whom she spent the most time with ever since entering high school, her most precious friend.

Inaba thought she knew Nagase lori better than anyone else.

But it was really nothing more than 'she thought.'

*Accept it, she told herself. Accept this undeniable truth with your heart.*

*And then, from there, think about how to make the next step.*

Since she did not have that realisation before, she only managed to confront lori half-heartedly. Hence, she was punished for her naivety in the end, hurting the others long the way. Inaba regretted this.

Also, as she watched Taichi's every move, Inaba remembered.

She had received the others' benevolence many times, yet she had forgotten it. Inaba deeply regretted this.

No, was it only because she hadn't found her resolve then?

Now that she thought of it, she had never reveal everything herself, yet she wanted the others to reveal everything. What insolence.

If she wished the others to dig out their heart, she must first dig out her own.

This is an unwritten truth.

But wasn't this exactly the 'self-sacrificing spirit' that she had been painstakingly reminding Taichi to be mindful of?

Actually, who cared.

Inaba felt the current her could do anything, nothing would be a problem for her.

Having been recognized by the one she loved, Inaba felt empowered. She found this feeling fascinating.

Who was Inaba Himeko?

*—She will always take act whenever a decision is made. She will never give up no matter the odds. Arrogant, patronizing, willing to manipulative others for personal gain, and willing to do whatever it takes to achieve what she wants. That's Inaba Himeko!*

These were words that her most important friend had told her from a while back—the time when she hated every single inch of herself. Even until now, Inaba treasured those words deep in her heart.

What was she acting like a weakling for?

Back at that moment, back at that time, those words she said from her heart, were they all lies?

*Not a chance.*

What she could do now, was to stay true to herself, the very self that Iori told her about.

It would also mean that, she had faith in Nagase Iori.

She had been in her 'girl in love' mode lately. This mode of hers, on the other hand, didn't get much chance to shine.

It was time for her to get back on track.

It was all thanks to Lori, that Inaba was able to make it to where she was today.

Nagase Lori was her important friend no matter how one would put it.

As for carrying out the plan... How about Friday, when the finals end?

She prayed that this thought wouldn't be transmitted by 'Sentiment Transmission.'

Actually, no.

"I won't let your 'Sentiment Transmission' interfere, «Heartseed». Because it'll be more interesting this way. ...What say you?"

Inaba declared towards her 'observer' «Heartseed», a fearless smile brimmed on her face.

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"Setouchi-san is here for you..."

My classmate, Nakayama Mariko, said to me.

"I see."

I replied and stood up from my seat.

Setouchi Kaoru and her two female friends from other classes stood at the entrance. They were reknown delinquents.

"Are you gonna be alright?"

Nakayama inquired with concern.

"I'll be fine."

"Erm... Lori?" Nakayama said nervously.

"I understand Lori is putting on this frightening look towards Setouchi-san because of the dispute between you two... but why are you acting so coldly towards us too?"

Why...? I knew it was wrong. But there was no going back for me.

"Nothing particular... it's normal."

Normal? Really? ...But I was no longer normal anyway.

"Inaba-san told us that there's a reason why you're acting like this. I believe so too, but..."

"I see."

I avoided Nakayama's eyes and headed towards the door.

"...I don't understand this, Iori."

Me neither.

"Shouldn't you be reflecting already?"

Setouchi said in a haughty manner.

*You're nothing but a chicken without those two behind your back,* I cursed in my head. I was completely taken over by spite.

"I don't recall doing anything worth reflecting about."

Honestly, all I did was rejecting the one Setouchi liked, Shiroyama Shouto. And now she was nagging me because of that, I thought it was ridiculous... That being said, if I was a bit more tactful, things probably wouldn't have come to this. Why did I keep making all these unnecessary moves?

I had this odd feeling that, there was something on Setouchi that reminded me of myself...

"You truly are a shameless one aren't you?"

Setouchi stared at me angrily.

"You made Yaegashi pull all those nonsense. You tricked Yaegashi into doing that for you, didn't you?"

"...What are you talking about?"

Now that I thought of it, Nakayama had said something like that as well. Did Taichi and the others do something? Why? I was not worth their trouble at all. I could not answer to their expectation.

"Ha!" Setouchi sneered. "Hmph, playing the fool now are we? Oh well, whatever. What happened to that mask of yours anyway? You've given up on playing sweet already?"

As though mocking, the two girls behind Setouchi started snickering.

That stirred me greatly, so I decided to provoke them.

"In the end, what are you trying to do? What are you after?"

I said it in a manner that hinted "Are you really that bored that you'd waste your time like this?" towards them.

Upon hearing my words, Setouchi retracted her smile (Though the two behind her remained unfazed.)

"...I have no need to answer you."

Setouchi answered straightforwardly. She did not have any particular goal in mind after all.

"By the way, the club you're part of, Cultural Research... what again? The club you're part of seem to be competing with the Jazz Band for a club advisor. I heard you're going to decide the outcome on the club presentation event, are you?"

I was the club president, yet I had been ignoring the entire ordeal, what a terrible person I am. However, I decided to brush aside my conscience for the time being.

"So?"

"I want you to forfeit."

Oh, really now.

"Your club's just a party club, is it not? Doing stuff like snooping out love affairs between teachers and publish a news article for it."

She was talking about Inaba's article during the Cultural Festival.

"Why does a serious club like the Jazz Band have to be interfered by your kind of people?"

"You're not one the Jazz Band anyway, Setouchi-san."

"Shut up!"

"Is it because Shiroyama-san's one of the Jazz Band?"

"...I said shut up!"

I was probably overdoing it. There must be better ways than provoking her like this. No normal people would do this.

Setouchi's face turned red.

"Just stop interfering with them!"

She didn't seem very used to threatening people. Her tone was a lot less intimidating than it could've been. Perhaps that was why I was able to remain so calm.

"There's no point telling me that. The ones who've been working hard are everyone but me in the club."

"I want you to sabotage from the inside."

"What's in it for me?"

"Do you know your position right now?"

"No I don't."

"You...!"

I must say though—

*[ I think I've figured it out... Setouchi Kaoru, she... Seems like my intuition weren't as dull as I thought after all. ]*

This seemingly cryptic 'Sentiment Transmission' of mine was transmitted to Yui and Aoki. I doubt they would be able to understand it.

Meanwhile, one of those two girls behind Setouchi spoke:

"...She's starting to get on my nerve. I say we teach her a lesson."

A wicked smile emerged on her face. The other girl followed: "I think so too~"

One of them whispered into Setouchi's ear.

"Such as... let... do this... like that."

"Eh? That... isn't that a little overboard..."

Setouchi seemed hesitant.

*Ah, I knew it, Setouchi, she—*

"It's fine. Those guys... All we need to say... anything..."

"Y—You're right, good idea... It's your fault."

Setouchi said with a shady look on her face and walked away. The other two followed suit.

"What is she up to..."

I murmured to myself as I was left alone in the hallway.

I had a bad feeling about this.

My legs began to tremble.

I was afraid.

What I just did. What this situation was. Their continue antagonism. Should the situation escalate, should nobody believe me anymore—Were these all because of my current self?

They mentioned the CRC. If I brought trouble for everyone, what should I do? I figured I would need to keep an eye on Setouchi. I should check on the club room too.

What the hell? Just what did I really want to do?

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up already.

Would it have been better the other way? ...Or would it've not? Which one was it?

...I did not know what to do anymore.

### Chapter 7 - A Conciliation for Yaegashi Taichi

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On Friday morning, after the exams ended, Taichi and Inaba headed towards the club room together.

Before they left, Taichi had said to Nagase "Let's go to the club room together Nagase. After all, you need to take part in the oral report too," and she seemed to have nodded slightly. Although they could insist her, Taichi decided that they should respect her wish, and did not push her on coming to the club room.

The club presentation event that would decide the fate of the CRC would be taking place next week. The booklets and paper vellum for the presentation were all completed. The only thing left for them to do was to rehearse their oral report. Allegedly the number of audience during the event had exceeded that of two classes combined, hence they wanted to rehearse as much as possible to refine their performance so as to maintain a good impression should they become nervous on stage.

Taichi had initially felt anxious about the whole ordeal regarding the presentation event, but now he actually felt a little anticipated. He was eager to know how the others would see the work they had poured their heart and soul into.

Taichi recalled his club activities during middle school. After a series of rehearsal, when he was finally about to set foot on stage during the event, that feeling of anxious yet unique excitement—he had never thought he would feel it again in the CRC.

He hurried towards the club room. He wanted to check on their presentation materials, which they had left untouched since when club activities were banned during the exams.

*[ Ah, we should take a picture. It's something we nurtured together after all. ]*

"Ah."

His passionate thought was transmitted to the other four.

"...Taichi, I treasure those materials as much as you do, but aren't you being a little too dramatic? It's kinda creepy, just saying."

His thought seemed to have deterred Inaba.

Kiriyama and Aoki had already arrived at the club room.

But for some reason, the two of them did not enter the room. They merely stood at the door motionless.

"Oi, what are you two doing?"

Inaba inquired. Kiriyama turned to look at them.

Kiriyama's face... was covered in tears.

"Inaba... Taichi... What do we do now... Uuu..."

"Kiriyama!?"

Taichi shouted and raced by their side.

Aoki turned around as well. He pointed at the club room with a pale expression on his face.

"...What's wrong?"

Taichi, puzzled, peeked into the club room.

The club room was completely ravaged.

The tables were knocked over, the fold chairs were thrown all over the place as well... No, that wasn't that big of a deal. The furniture were intact. All they needed to do was put them back in place.

The problem lay with their materials for the oral report.

Their paper vellum were ripped to shreds.

"How did this..."

Taichi staggered into the club room, and collapsed on his knee.

He searched through the pile of paper shreds. The map they had drawn, the points of interest articles... None of them were spared.

"I've spent... so much... time drawing this..."

Kiryama shakily picked up one of the shreds. It was part of one of the illustrations she drawn.

It wasn't just Kiryama's. That piece over there was Aoki's. This was Inaba's, that was Taichi's. And this right here was what Nagase made before she stopped coming to the club room.

Nagase may had done the least amount of work among the five of them, but even then, it was still a product of their combined effort.

These materials were the blood and soul of the five members of the Cultural Research Club. Even if they ignored the fact that they needed these materials for the club presentation, these were still irreplaceable memories for them.

"We've spent so much work on this..."

It was so upsetting that they felt sick.

They looked at what remained of their work; there was simply no way to restore them.

Aoki said blankly:

"Who was it... We locked the door... We've just fetched the key from the teacher's office to open the door..."

"The security of the club room keys is actually pretty lackluster. It's not impossible to take the keys momentarily without anyone noticing."

Inaba answered calmly. Just as Taichi was wondering why her answering tone did not match the anger she was exhibiting on her face, she exploded in rage.

"If I find out who did this... I will not let him off easy!"

Inaba smashed her fist against the wall.

"...Inaba, there's no use feeling angry right now..."

As for Taichi, he felt far more despairing than enraged.

"How am I supposed to stay calm after seeing this, dammit! Who's the culprit behind this!? ...Was it the Jazz Band...!?"

"That's... not possible, right? They've been practicing very hard too, I don't think they would resort to this underhanded measure..."

That being said, Taichi could not think of anyone else that shared a stake with the CRC. Could they have unknowingly offended someone? Or was it an offender for pleasure?

Reminiscing on their time working on this together, Taichi felt heavy in his heart.

"What do we do... I don't understand... How could they do this..."

Kiryama murmured as she wiped her tears with her sleeves.

The room fell into silent. None of them were able to say anything.

They were crushed by the harsh reality before them.

All four of them...

*Wait, Taichi suddenly thought. If Nagase was here, what would she do?*

Nagase was not necessary the most stable person among them, so she wouldn't be able to do this every time; but, if she was the usual cheer-bringing, bright, spirited Nagase Iori...

"...Let's start over. Again."

Taichi said as such.

He was astonished at his own words.

Even if it was just his being desperate and acting strong.

"But... the presentation event is next week... There's no way we can make it..."

Kiryama said in a barely audible volume.

"I'm turned off too..."

Aoki said tiredly.

"It may be difficult to recreate something like this again—"

"—but if we go for a compact version, we still got plenty of time."

Before Taichi could say more, Inaba finished off the sentence for him.

Inaba gave Taichi a knowing grin, and pound his chest lightly.

At that instant, Taichi had this sudden urge of wanting to exchange thoughts with Inaba through 'Sentiment Transmission,' even though he harness a guess at what she was thinking.

"Eh? But, we can't beat the Jazz Band with that though can we...?"

In face of Kiriyma's perfectly valid question, Inaba simply and straightforwardly shook her head.

"You're right. It's going to be a close fight, but—"

"—it doesn't mean we'll lose."

This time it was Taichi who stole the rest of Inaba's line.

*Hmph!* Inaba laughed and continued: "After a second thought, the only things that were destroyed are the materials we were going to use as visual attraction during our oral report. If that's the case, we'll emphasize on competing them with content and gripping of audience during our oral report!"

Taichi and Inaba, the two of them together guided the CRC towards a new light.

Suddenly, Aoki clenched on his head and started moaning "Nnnngggghhh" loudly, which might make one wonder whether if he was feeling ill.

"That's right! There's no use feeling down! We gotta move forward!"

After shouting determinedly, Aoki muttered to himself:

"...Even though I wanted to become someone who could bring themselves to be the first one to say such things, seems I still have a long way to go..."

And then, Kiriyma, too, covered her eyes with her arm, and started moaning.

What was going on? Was it because she got along with Aoki that she was beginning to act like him?

"Unnngh... Energize the weak and depressed me from just now!"

Kiriyma shouted and continued:

"This is outrageous, I want to cry, actually I've cried already, but this is not the time for me to cry like a baby!"

Kiriyma crossed her arms in the air, and shouted "Alright!" before putting her arms down again.

"By the way, there's no doubt about competing them with content and our oral report's performance, but using a compacted version of our visual presentation... isn't that the same as giving up?"

Kiryama said and beamed. The fighter girl who picked herself up using her karate ways was now extremely resolved.

"I'm going to make those visual materials cute and lovely again, even if it means pulling all-nighters! I'm all fired up! Viva Kawaii! [\[6\]](#)!"

"Yo, Yui! You're so cool!"

Aoki echoed in high spirit.

"Please say I'm cute!"

Everyone's spirit had been mercilessly torn to shreds.

However, they were all beginning to gather themselves up.

Even though they might not have completely regained their footing within, they tried to appear so.

This, for them, was what they needed right now.

Taichi could almost say with confidence that, the Cultural Research Club had grown stronger.

They were strong enough to believe their not losing to anyone.

Then Taichi spoke: "Okay then, let's put the culprit aside for now and get our work started."

"That being said, after the presentation event ended, we'll still need to find the culprit. You dirty little culprit... Run to the end of hell all you want, I'm gonna find you and make you wish you've never been born!!!"

"Inaba... You're sounding like a villain now."

"But, shouldn't we figure out who the culprit was and take countermeasures in case they come again?"

"As expected from Yui! Your point of view is sharp as ever! So cool... Er, so cute!"

"Just add the word 'cool' and say I'm 'cool and cute'!"

Inaba listened to Kiryama and Aoki's conversation, and replied:

"About that, we should be fine if we take our materials home."

The CRC members did not give up. Rather, they looked forward, contemplated on their next step, and slowly advanced forward.

"In that case..."

Taichi peered around the club room.

*First we need to clean up the shreds, and then put the furniture back in their places.*

At that moment—

The door opened lightly. A crop of hair that was tied into a pigtail could be seen.

Nagase Iori gingerly poked her head in and was about to slip the rest of her body into the club room, but she froze halfway.

For an instant, she appeared puzzled and pushed her brows together, but then her eyes widen in shock.

Nagase's eyes scanned around the club room.

She caught sight of the fallen tables and chairs, and the shreds of paper vellum on the floor.

Nagase stood motionless and gazed at the scene as though trying to sear the sight into her eyes.

And then, she closed the door without entering the room.

[ ——will not forgive you. I will not forgive you. No matter how you apologize, I will never forgive you for getting others besides me involved! ]

It was Nagase's 'Sentiment Transmission.'

Anger. Hatred. Anger. Hatred. Hatred. Anger. Anger. Hatred. Anger. Hatred. Anger. Anger. Hatred.

An uncontrollable, boiling sentiment comprised with only anger and hatred flowed into Taichi.

[ Should I make you cry? Should I make you scream? How should I make you pay for it Setouchi Kaoru!!! ]

Taichi's view became shrouded in red. He felt his blood boiling. He thought he couldn't breathe.

A black, destructive fire raged about, as though seeking to incinerate everything in the way.

He felt his conscious consumed, dominated, overpowered... He felt his stomach turned.

Taichi shook his head, and regained his balance. He felt a terrible chill from what he just felt.

It was the most intense and powerful 'Sentiment Transmission' he had ever experienced.

*This is bad*— Taichi's instinctively thought.

A sentiment as powerful as that could not be controlled by mere reason alone.

This rage would only be appeased by erupting.

"Don't do it, Iori!"

Inaba cried at the door which Iori was standing at earlier.

"Inaba, did Nagase's 'Sentiment Transmission'..."

"Taichi felt it too?"

Taichi nodded towards Inaba's question.

"Eh? What's wrong, Inaba-chan? Taichi?"

"Iori... She came to the club room... Yet..."

Judging by Aoki and Yui's tone, they did not receive the 'Sentiment Transmission' just now.

Taichi said to Inaba:

"Inaba, that rage..."

"This is bad. If we don't stop her, this could escalate into an injury incident."

"Should we go after her?"

"Yeah. Yui and Aoki, you guys help clean up the club room for now. Let's go, Taichi!"

Taichi and Inaba raced out of the room.

"Why didn't you ask Kiriyama and Aoki to help?"

Taichi inquired Inaba after their leaving the club room.

"...I don't think Iori'd want this to spread."

True enough, that sentiment back there was not exactly the nicest thing one would come across. Not only it did not match people's usual image of Nagase, she most likely wouldn't want others to know about it.

The two descended the stairs of the recreational building.

"Besides, I already have a plan. I know how to intercept her."

Inaba took out her cell phone.

"Judging by how she went ballistic, I doubt she'd be able to think with a level head, and would probably be blindly searching all over the place... Ah, Fujishima? Sorry for calling you all of the sudden. Do you happen to know Setouchi Kaoru's number?"

Inaba had a point. If they knew what Nagase was after, it shouldn't be hard intercept her.

"Okay... Thank you, I'll pay you back after this."

Inaba ended the call, said "She's going to text me the number," and put away her phone.

"I must say though, I thought she was going to ask for something in return. I didn't expect her to let me have Setouchi's number without asking any questions. It's almost as though she knew how urgent the situation is..."

As expected Fujishima Maiko, her ability to read the situation was impressive as well.

"But... why is it Setouchi Kaoru?"

Taichi felt puzzled and murmured to himself.

Did those two have any dispute? After all, Setouchi had been provoking the others to isolate Nagase. Not to mention Nagase seemed to be 100% certain that Setouchi was responsible for the ravaging of the club room. How was she so certain of it?

"Here it is."

Inaba picked up her phone once more, and dialed Setouchi's number.

Setouchi was still in school, so they were able to meet up fairly quickly.

"W—What do you want from me? Calling me all of the sudden, and having me come all the way out here to the back of the school building."

Setouchi combed her brown, long hair using her fingers and asked.

"You seem to be in for a bit of trouble. But don't worry, we'll stop her when she comes." Inaba replied.

"Who's... 'she'?"

Setouchi seemed unusually tense. Taichi found it a bit suspicious.

".....Nagase Iori."

Inaba made a dramatic pause on purpose before telling the name.

Setouchi's body jolted a little—she seemed very afraid.

*Could it really be that, the one responsible for the ravaging of the club room was Setouchi? No, we shouldn't jump to conclusions yet—* Taichi thought and suppressed his anger.

"I—I don't know anything, it wasn't me."

Nobody asked her any questions, yet she started trying to make excuses. Taichi was finding it more and more suspicious.

He peeked towards Inaba by his side. She was staring fiercely at Setouchi.

"Anyway," Inaba spoke. "Let's move to one of the classrooms. There is something to I want to ask you about."

As she finished her sentence, Taichi saw a figure came at a distance ahead of them—Nagase Iori was standing right before their eyes.

"Puff... Puff..." She was gasping uncontrollably.

How did she find this place? No, it would not matter anymore.

Even from afar, one could see that Nagase was trembling in rage.

She did not hold back a single bit of her emotion, her rage openly displayed itself on the surface, and her face was filled with utmost ferocity and fury and not a shred of innocence or elegance.

There was not a single trace left of whom was said to be the Number One Beauty of the Grade.

Her rage was so intense that it could destroy Taichi's image of Nagase Iori in his heart.

"...I won't forgive you——!!!"

Nagase let out a ear-piercing howl and charged at Setouchi.

She was sprinting at an unusual speed... She was fast!

And then, Nagase raised her fist.

"Ehh...!? Ah..."

Setouchi was startled and stood frozen on the spot.

*Not good, we have to do something quick.*

Taichi took step. Inaba next to him did the same as well.

"Stop it, Nagase!" "Wait, Iori!"

Taichi and Inaba blocked in front of Nagase and kept her from advancing.

Nagase then attempted to pass around them.

With no other option, Taichi grabbed onto her body to restrain her. Inaba followed suit.

"Oi...!"

"Don't stop me, Taichi! Inaban! I won't forgive that woman! I won't forgive her!!!"

Inaba shouted over Nagase and said: "Setouchi! Hurry and get out of here! Now!"

"...Ah ...G—Got it."

Setouchi, who was still frozen from fear, regained her senses as she heard Inaba's call and made her escape.

"Stop right there, Setouchi!!!!"

Nagase screamed furiously at the escaping Setouchi as she struggled violently.

"Don't stop me! Don't stop me you two! Don't stop me... Don't stop me, please..."

Nagase's strength began to dissipate.

"Don't stop me... Don't stop— I'm sorry."

As Nagase apologized, she collapsed and sat on the ground.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry... This is all my fault!"

She sat on the ground. Tears began to flow from her eyes.

"I was only... Ohh... I'm sorry... Why... How did it... come to this... I was... I only..."

Suddenly, Nagase fell into silence. She wiped her tears with her sleeve. The next moment, her expression vanished.

It was as though she had severed herself from this world.

Taichi released Nagase's hand. Her arm fell silently from mid air.

Taichi recollected the events from before.

«Heartseed» appeared once again and triggered the 'Sentiment Transmission' phenomenon.

However, they encouraged each other, believing that they could overcome this phenomenon, and decided to live their lives like they usually would.

During this time, Taichi confessed his love to Nagase, and then Nagase rejected Taichi.

Due to the influence of 'Sentiment Transmission,' they had exchanged many feelings.

And then, negative rumours about Nagase began to spread. Students in the class began to shun Nagase.

At that same period, Nagase herself started to behave strangely as well.

Nagase even went as far as rejected everyone's help and continued on alone.

Even though the class's negative criticism towards Nagase had been dissipating lately, her attitude did not show any improvement.

Then came the incident of ravaging of the CRC club room.

—And now, Nagase, expressionless, merely sat silently on the ground.

It was as though the commotion just now had never happened, the scene fell into complete silence.

*What should I say to her?* Taichi contemplated, but could not come up with an answer.

As he was pondering, however, Inaba spoke.

"...Hey, Iori."

She said in a kind, soft tone.

"Would you like to have a heart to heart talk with me? I won't take no for an answer."

A bold smile lit across on Inaba's face.

□■□■□

Inaba led Nagase forward.

"Hmm, there's no harm for you to stick around at the beginning," since that was what Inaba insisted, Taichi followed behind them.

Inaba stopped by at the teacher's office, coaxed Gotou into lending them a key, and headed towards an empty classroom.

She opened the door. The three entered the classroom. Then, Inaba locked the door from the inside.

"What are we using an empty classroom for? Actually, why are we locking the doors too?"

"Er, how should I say it... I'm about to start a locked-room deathmatch."

"...Don't do anything crazy okay."

Though Taichi must admit he was pretty excited at hearing 'locked-room deathmatch.' It sounded like something that would show up in pro wrestling; it would've been even better if they added a 'no escape' flavour on top.

Since the classroom was usually not in use, all the desks were stacked up in the corners and had a wide clearing between the two entrances of the classroom.

Inaba and Nagase stood in that space face to face, while Taichi spectated on the side.

Inaba was standing arm crossed with her back straight in an arrogant gesture.

Nagase, on the other hand, was staring silently at the empty floor of the room.

And then Inaba took the initiative, and began the battle.

"I've said to you before right? That I wished you to tell me your problems. Since I can't understand anything with just those fragments of information, I wanted you to tell me everything."

Inaba was taking act using her own method, for the sake of Nagase.

"Now that I think about it though, that was a stupid request. After all, I was asking you to expose yourself for nothing... especially when it was something you didn't want others to find out."

Nagase merely listened to Inaba's words with an expressionless look on her.

"I didn't expose any part of myself, yet I asked you to open your heart. It did seem a little selfish, it wasn't fair to you at all."

Nagase jolted a little.

"So let's make it fairer this time. Apparently my request will pain you. In that case, I will pay the same amount of pain of my own as a price."

A thought suddenly came to Taichi—*Why do I feel like I've seen this before?*

"As of now we are under the influence of 'Sentiment Transmission,' which transmits our thoughts to others including the ones we don't want them to know. That being said, to ask whether this phenomenon would send out everything, it is actually not the case. This you probably knew already right?"

*What is Inaba up to?*

"In this condition, I... am going to confess something extremely embarrassing."

*...Don't tell me...*

"I'd be shamed to death. So Iori, you too, no matter how much you resist the idea, you gotta tell us why you're so down and rejecting everyone around you."

*'I will confess myself, so you must do the same'—Isn't this like during 'Personality Exchange'...*

"Oi, Inaba! Isn't this what I've done to you before!?"

Taichi was going to remain silent, but could no longer hold himself.

"You have a problem with that?"

"Very! What's the point of doing this anyway!? Actually, where's the logic in this to begin with!?"

*And stop copying me!*

"You did this yourself too! If you don't get the point, go ask yourself again! And try to understand how I and the others feel will you!? You freaking jerk!"

"Are you raging back at me!?"

"I am raging back at you!"

"You're admitting it!?"

"Shut up! Actually, I'm talking to Iori right now! If you're gonna keep nagging then get out!"

True enough, they would be pretty much ignoring Nagase if they kept this up. Taichi realised this, and reluctantly compromised.

"I was interrupted... Anyway, from this moment on I'll be saying something extremely embarrassing."

Inaba had no intention to change her plan.

"And since we're still under the influence of 'Sentiment Transmission,' this conversation can become risky; not to mention, I'm going to be confessing this in front of the guy I like. So under these circumstances right now, my level of shame has risen to its peak!"

Was that why he was arranged to spectate in this position? Taichi finally realised this fact.

*That being said, in the eyes of a bystander...*

"...This is plain stupid."

"This is what you've done before no!? You even said you've used me and other girls for your mas—"

"Don't— Don't— Don't say it! Why did you almost blurt it out!?"

Taichi, horrified, managed to stop Inaba from continuing the sentence.

He was an inch away from being wiped off the face of earth (in terms of his place in society.)

"Make another noise and I'm gonna kick you out for real, get it!?"

"...I wouldn't have said a word if it weren't for your bringing up strange things, Inaba. Actually, if that's the case, I should really be the one to be making embarrassing con—"

"Shut up! To hell with your 'I should really be,' you idiot~!"

Since they couldn't leave Nagase aside like this, Taichi painfully decided to shut his mouth.

"Well then, first of all..."

*Fufufu*, Inaba smiled mischievously:

"As everyone already knows, I love Taichi."

*...Kind of wish she wouldn't say 'everyone already knows,' this is embarrassing.*

"This feeling's been growing stronger lately, I even started dreaming about him."

Nagase remained silent and listened to Inaba's speech.

"And then, just recently, I finally had this dream where I and Taichi had almost entered restricted footage... Since I woke up right away, I didn't really do anything."

*Inaba... I'm the one who's more embarrassed here you know*, Taichi thought. What kind of punishment game was this anyway, he could feel his cheeks burning.

"The moment I woke, my heart was pounding like crazy. My chest started wrenching. And at the same time... I felt lonely."

*Oi! Please don't tell me that... this is also...*

"I felt lonely... I felt like I couldn't breath... How should I say it, I felt... something itching, and I started thinking about Taichi and—"

"What the hell are you saying!? You're a pervert right!? You're a pervert!"

"Shut up pervert! You did the exact same thing yourself so you've got no right to call out on me!"

"Y—Y—You said I did the same thing... That was... Okay fine maybe I did!"

*You could at least have a bit of shame you know!* Taichi wished from the bottom of his heart—

*[Crap. This is so embarrassing. I wanna cry.]*

It was Inaba Himeko's 'Sentiment Transmission,' her feelings were transmitted to Taichi.

He had forgotten due to the frantic situation just now, but now he remembered.

Really, he should have known by now.

Even though she was daring and competitive, and would always put on a haughty front, Inaba was in fact an ever worrying, timid, and shy girl at heart.

*[But I'm not gonna cry. I will not cry. That being said, thank goodness you're here Taichi. Thank you for stopping me on the way.]*

However, she was also a strong, persevering girl who was able to conquer her own weakness with sheer power of will.

Did Nagase receive this 'Sentiment Transmission'? Taichi had no way to tell. But, if it were Nagase, even if she didn't receive it, she would still be able to feel it.

Nagase bit her lip.

—*Thump.* Inaba stomped her foot on the floor.

"How was that! ...It was a little sloppy at the end, but this is embarrassing right? Not to mention, I said it right in front of both you and Taichi. This would've probably hurt you guys, but I dropped the bomb anyway! So you don't have to hold back, whatever bomb you might have, just bring it on! If that wasn't enough for you, I can give you a couple more!"

True to Inaba's style, not only did she copy Taichi's method, she even upgraded it.

"I'm not done yet!"

Inaba's advancement had not stopped yet.

"You had also told me before... that I was irresponsible, as I started out trying to pair you and Taichi up... yet I butt in and went 'I like Taichi too' afterwards... and that I openly admit it just because you were willing to support me..."

A lot had happened between Nagase and Inaba. Many, many things. Taichi had heard bits of them afterwards: Inaba had believed herself to be a worthless, unwanted person, but Nagase rejected that, and told Inaba that she was better than she thought she was.

"After being reprimanded by Iori... I didn't know what I should do. I tried to come up with an answer..., but in the end... I realised it couldn't be helped!"

It was a declaration that she had given up searching for a solution.

"If it was the me from before... If it was the rational, logical me from before, I would never accept this conclusion! But now I've accepted it! Even without anything like logical or theoretical or objective so-called evidence, I will... I will... I..."

Inaba, who had been striding on with a surging vigour, lost her momentum for the first time.

Inaba worried more than anyone; she had long been imprisoned in her negative notion, and was unable to open herself towards others, entangling herself in a never ending loop of doubt; she believed herself to be worthless, unwanted; she was unable to trust herself or the others, and hence deeply despised herself.

However, those had become things from the past.

"I might still be lacking a little compared with other people..."

She said shrinkingly, but her eyes did not waver and continued to fixate on Nagase.

"But I... believe in myself!"

Inaba proclaimed determinedly.

"This may be irresponsible, but since I can no longer stop myself, I'm just gonna go on ahead and admit it! Am I shameless? Yes! But, so what if I am?"

She went on ahead and frankly admitted it.

"If you have a problem with that, don't hesitate to say it, I'll take it all in. Except that, I'm not that strong, so chances are I will depress myself over it."

But Inaba remained frank and forthright. She would not yield. She would not escape.

"But even then, even if I will feel depressed many, many times, I will stand up again!"

Inaba Himeko would not run away. She would stand up and confront the path she'd chosen.

"I will continue to be shameless! So feel free to become shameless like me! Be irresponsible too if you want! In fact I'm talking very irresponsibly right now, so there's no need to consider my feelings! Just stop thinking alone and driving yourself into a wall! I can't stand watching you from the side like that!"

Inaba took a deep breath, gathering every bit of air she could in her lungs, and shouted:

"This is all about me!"

Inaba's voice echoed throughout the empty classroom.

How much of these words would also echoe within Nagase's heart?

Nagase kept her head low, and bit on her lip once again. Her hands were clenching tightly on her uniform skirt. Her body was trembling slightly.

"— ...already."

Nagase murmured something.

Taichi realise that this was the first time Nagase had spoken since entering this classroom.

"...Hmm?"

Inaba turned her head slightly. Taichi, too, turned his ear towards Nagase.

"Enough... already."

It was a flat and impassive voice.

"What do you mean—"

"I said I've had enough already!"

Nagase screamed, interrupting Inaba.

And then, she continued on:

"Cut it out already. What was that supposed to be? You're... You're.... You're like..."

Nagase exhaled briefly, and contracted her body, as though she was charging up strength for an incoming outburst.

And then, as she lifted herself, she filled her lungs with as much air as she could and unleashed:

"You're like a bunch of IDIOTS-----!!!"



Her voice boomed so loudly one could almost feel the room shaken by it. Fortunately, nearly all of the classrooms on this level were empty, but the noise might still reach the floor below.

Such shocking volume had left Taichi dumbfounded as well.

"A—Are you alright, Nagase?"

Upon hearing that question, Nagase broke into a shady grin.

"Sure, sure. That confession was embarrassing, it was soooo touching... And then?"

Nagase's eyes lost their gleam completely. And then, she squinted her eyes and laughed.

"Yes, you're right, I know how this goes. I'm supposed to feel touched here, break into tears and go 'I'm sorry... I actually...', and cue the happy ending right there, am I right? Well, too bad! I can't act according to your wish! Don't think everything will run perfectly according to your pre-written little script!"

*Ha!* Nagase snorted mockingly.

And then, she snapped.

"I've had enough already! I'm sick of it! Really sick of it! How many times do you have to repeat this crap!? Don't you ever get bored of it!? How are you even able to repeat this so many times!?"

*No matter what reason she might have, isn't she going too far?* Taichi thought, and decided to step in:

"Oi, Nagase, don't you know how much courage Inaba mustered to do what she just did? She was doing it for your sake."

Even if it was Nagase, Taichi could not tolerate her disdaining Inaba like that.

Nagase's expression wavered for a moment, her adamant momentum had suddenly dwindled. However, she abruptly clutched onto her hair with her right hand as though wanting to forcefully shake off her doubt, and shouted:

"H—How should I know!? I've never asked you to do any of this..."

She paused, and continued:

"Enough already... I'm sick of all of this. Why am I being forced to act like some sort of tragedy lead character!? It's so unreal! It has to be fiction... But this is obviously the reality!"

The CRC had been going through many bizarre, abnormal situations. However, as unrealistic as they may seem, for Nagase and the rest of them, it was without a doubt a crushing reality.

"How many more times do I have to expose my feelings!? How many more times does my heart need to be treded on!? How many more times, tell me!!!"

The direction of the air changed slightly.

"How many more times do I have to go through these phenomena nonsense!? What the hell is «Heartseed» anyway!? Why is it the name of a freaking plant!? This is ridiculous! And how on earth does he possess people!? All of these, everything... None of these make any sense!"

The five of them from the CRC had been fighting against this abnormality together, and had confronted these phenomena several times. Because to this, Taichi had sometimes believed that they would be able to fight on like this.

However, Inaba had once warned him before (Around the time of when they were going through the 'Time Regression' phenomenon during their winter break, if Taichi's memory served him right.) She once said, if they continued to walk on the thin ice several times like this, someone was bound to slip through. It would only be natural for someone to break under such abnormality.

"Just stop it already! How many more times do I have to suffer like this!? How am I supposed to take it!? I can't... I can't stand it anymore!"

Taichi had never expected that it would happen on Nagase, and had already happened on Nagase.

Truth to be told, as they had persisted through «Heartseed»'s phenomena, even though it wasn't their own wish, they were forced to grow and become stronger.

They had overcome several crisis and were no longer beginners—This was how Taichi perceived it sometimes. Hence, he had underestimated these phenomena.

But now, Taichi realised that he was a fool for underestimating these phenomena.

He was too deeply influenced by the abnormality. His senses had dulled over time.

Under these kinds of condition, nothing was trivial.

They were responsible for not noticing Nagase's problem until she had finally snapped.

Nagase had stopped speaking, so Taichi took the opportunity and spoke:

"...You're right... It was only natural... You're in pain... right? We're sorry, for not noticing your pain."

"...It isn't like that."

And then, a shaken Inaba spoke as well:

"...I've never expected you to be this troubled... I've even said someone is bound to end up like this myself... thinking that I'd know better... We're sorry, you've done nothing wrong, it's not surprising that you've changed this much... But if that's that case, you don't need to push yourself, just feel free to rely on us... Until you recover, until you can stand up and say 'I'm alright' again, we'll do anything—"

"Like I said... it isn't like that!!!"

Nagase screamed vehemently, covering her eyes with one hand at the same time.

The exchanging fire of words suspended. The classroom fell into complete silence.

No one spoke. Normally, they would not be able to continue any conversation like this.

Normally.

However, they were not in a normal world.

The suspended time began flowing again.

—Because of 'Sentiment Transmission.'

[ *What kind of me... are you anticipating? I can't stand it any more!* ]

Flowing out from Nagase were her inner voice and feelings.

Nagase's sentiment was dark and chaotic. Taichi could feel it directly, yet he could not define what it was.

"'What kind of me'... 'anticipating'... what do you mean?"

Inaba asked. She seemed to have received Nagase's 'Sentiment Transmission' as well.

"Eh... No... Wait..."

Confounded, Nagase shook her head violently.

Nagase had been abused by her father, and thus had learned to adapt her persona according to different people around her, unknowingly losing her own perception of self on the way.

But as time passed, Nagase had experienced many things. Even though she was a person with many faces, Nagase had already accepted them as part of herself, and was slowly beginning to realise the true self that she had been searching for.

However, was Nagase still questioning her own sense of self in the end?

If that was the case, Taichi wanted to tell her one thing.

"Nagase, you don't need to feel afraid. You don't need to stress yourself, as long as you remain normal, everyone will feel happy, everyone will love you as—"

"I said I can't do it anymore!"

Nagase exclaimed and interrupted Taichi, but as soon as she did that, Nagase made a weak "Ah..." and stood rooted, at loss.

— I said I can't do it anymore?

Why was she saying discouraging things like that? Maybe she was traumatized from her current instability, but at the same time, Taichi believed Nagase to be an amazing girl, as she could bring the brightest light to people around her... This was what he anticipated.

Taichi remembered.

The five of them had exchanged their feelings with each other, their bonds had become stronger than ever. Not to mention, due to the influence of 'Sentiment Transmission,' they were able to see each other's thought, joining their hearts with each other.

But then, how did they not notice Nagase's state?

He felt something was wrong, yet he did not take action. Why?

One of the reason was, Nagase had been behaving very differently than the Nagase they knew, which caused him to hesitate.

The other reason was... He believed that, if it were Nagase, it would be alright.

She may suffer from a little instability from time to time, but everyone believed that Nagase was a strong-willed girl.

Not to mention, ever since «Heartseed» triggered the first phenomenon, even though Nagase had suffered the most, she had never given up, and had been holding on till the end.

Even if she had fallen right now, Nagase would still recover in the end—  
Everyone believed her to be a strong-willed person like that.

If it were the normal Nagase, it would be alright.

If it were Nagase, it would be—

...If it were Nagase?

Then, what if it weren't Nagase?

[ *What have I... No, what have we imposed on Iori?* ]

Inaba's thought flowed to Taichi through 'Sentiment Transmission.'

Taichi began to put the pieces together in his mind, including the one he got from Inaba.

The Nagase that he knew... No, the Nagase Iori that he believed to know, what kind of girl was she?

Nagase was able to display all kinds of expressions, and because of that, she was also somewhat unstable; there existed darker sides of her, as well as weaker sides. However, at heart she was kind and beautiful, gentle and

cheerful, and had an unyielding strong will that could overcome any adversity—Nagase was such a person... One could even say she was truly an amazing girl...

However, it could be that...

The puzzle piece in his heart, the puzzle piece in Inaba's heart, and the puzzle piece displayed by Nagase.

The Nagase who snapped from the frustration towards the abnormal phenomena... felt like a normal person. Taichi could sympathize with her pain, but it felt—different from the Nagase he knew of.

Nagase was a perfect, pretty girl while possessing a unique, dark side at the same time, which made her seem deep and mysterious at times. She had an attractive charm and a hardy spirit. Nagase was such a superb girl—Taichi had always believed it that way, however...

Those scattered pieces, the pieces that would have never come together without 'Sentiment Transmission'—fell into place in Taichi's heart.

[ *Could it be that Nagase is actually a much more ordinary, normal girl?* ]

Taichi's 'Sentiment Transmission' was transmitted to the remaining four members of the CRC.

"Nagase..."

Taichi called out weakly.

"I can't... I can't stand it anymore..."

As though she had finally reached her limit, tears trickled down Nagase's face.

And then Nagase's feelings, thoughts and the voice of her heart, flowedd from her lips.

"I can't stand it any longer... I can't do it! I can't keep up with everyone's expectation! Bringing happiness and loved by everyone, a person like that is too perfect! I can't become someone like that!"

That was what they—what he anticipated Nagase lori to be.

"In fact, I'm really a cold and mean person! You all would probably have... noticed this from 'Sentiment Transmission' already. And Taichi and Inaban should understand better after hearing what I've said earlier!"

What Nagase Iori truly was.

"But even then, I try to look cheerful! That's because... everyone seem happier that way, and more importantly, I feel happy too!"

These were Nagase's true words.

Nagase wiped her tears, and took a few breaths.

"I wasn't acting... I really wanted to become that kind of person from the bottom of my heart, so I kept it up, which is why that particular 'me'... was not a lie. It was me, the ideal and perfect me... but..."

Taichi and Inaba listened quietly to Nagase's confession.

"I'm tired of trying to be the ideal 'me' needed by others!!!"

Nagase cried at the top of her voice.

They had never noticed. They did not notice.

Nagase had been pushing herself all these times.

Especially Taichi, who had been the closest one watching her.

"I'm a coward! I'm worthless! I'm despicable! I'm petulant! I'm a loner! I'm much worse than everyone would ever think I am! I even... I even said terrible things to Inaban who'd been trying so hard for me! I'm the most awful person you'd even find!"

While Taichi would not conclude that Nagase was a bad person just because of that, he was very surprised indeed, as it felt very different from the Nagase that he had imagined.

"I'm irresponsible! I'm much more irresponsible than Inaban! I pretended to be a sweet, nice girl, putting on a perfect front... I made everyone believe that I'm that sort of girl... Yet now I get tired of it and say things like I can't stand it!"

Nagase expressed her true feelings not through 'Sentiment Transmission,' but rather her own will.

"But, if I've acted as my ideal self once... the others would expect me to be the same next time right? If somebody wished that way, I'd have no

choice but to answer to it! Because if I don't, it would look like I'd been lying before!"

With a compelling expression, Nagase vented out every word she had been holding in.

"Being anticipated... That was what everybody needed from me, right? I wanted to believe myself to be that kind of person too... But still, in the end... I realise that I'm not that kind of person, I even found the real me that I've lost before! I knew I... could no longer play the role of such an amazing person!"

Nagase, who had all kinds of faces, her first choice was the self that exceeds her own ability.

"Then again..."

Nagase muttered, and exhaled slowly. Her emotion entered a brief low point.

"If we were living normally... even if reality was different from my ideals, things wouldn't turn into this bizarre situation... I might have been able to hold on... But!"

Nagase spoke once again determinedly, conveying her feelings to others and confirming her own words at the same time.

"Who the hell does «Heartseed» think he is!?"

The culprit who started these abnormal phenomena.

"Possessing me, throwing me into the river, saying that I'll die... I was very scared and sad, but I still urged myself to hang on till the last minute!"

This was during 'Personality Exchange.'

"Even if he didn't mean to kill, but then the guy who almost murdered me popped up in front of me again. I was afraid! I kept worrying, what if he does it again... and what if I die for real this time... But even then, I tried hard to stay strong with everybody!"

This was during 'Desire Unleash.'

"And then many things happened, I was broken, exhausted, then he showed up again, as though seeing through my heart and asked me 'Would you like to start over again?' I was a mess so I was really shaken, but I still managed to kick him out of the way!"

This was during 'Time Regression.'

"I tried! I tried so hard I even wanted to praise myself! I really tried!"

Taichi knew how hard she had tried. If anyone could achieve that without trying, then that would be truly abnormal.

However, the amount of effort she 'tried' with exceeded way beyond Taichi's imagination that it began to wear out Nagase's spirit, pushing her towards the limit.

"But I can't keep trying like that everytime! I've started to feel myself being unable to keep up that amazing side of mine, unable to continue that perfect display! So I wanted to return to the original me without needing to answer to anyone's expectation. I wanted to go back to... the me that wasn't pretending to be someone I'm not!"

Taichi peeked at Inaba, only to find Inaba gazing silently at Nagase, motionless.

"I wanted to shake off that ideal me... and show my cold and mean side. But then came 'Sentiment Transmission'. I thought to myself that, if I don't hurry, if you notice the difference between my actions and my thoughts, you would all mistake me as a 'liar'... I was really afraid of that... I don't want our memories to be mistaken as lies... It was only because I've tried harder before, it was not a lie at all!"

She had been acting and assuming all kinds of persona—as someone with that mindset, if Nagase found others questioning whether her past effort was a lie, it was not surprising that she would think that way.

"I kept telling myself to hurry... But I was very confused, I didn't know what was going on... I didn't know how to make the me from before disappear, I also didn't know whether my new self would be accepted by others... I didn't know what to do at all, my mind was in chaos, things turned worse and worse, yet I could do nothing to fix it... But then I... I... I can't possibly do everything right all the time! Even... Even if I wanted to!"

Nagase sniffed as she finished speaking.

Taichi was unable to say anything. The flood of Nagase's sentiment that she had been holding in and accumulating all these times had deeply shaken him.

In the end, he was unable to understand Nagase's true nature after all.

He felt he was in no position to say anything to Nagase.

Inaba, too, had been silent and was hesitant on what to s—

"The hell should I know, STUUUUUUUUUUUUUPID!!!"

Inaba shouted very childishly.

It felt as though many things at that moment were spoiled.

"Wha—?"

Nagase startled for a moment and said:

"Y—You call me stupid..."

"You called me an idiot earlier too! By the way you talk too much! Far, far too much! So much, it ticks me off, stupid!"

*Stupid stupid stuuupid~~* Inaba rattled on.

It was a frivilous tone without any sympathy.

Nagase was struck speechless, her eyes widened from bewilderment.

The heavy atmosphere was blown faraway.

Inaba dispelled that atmosphere.

Was Inaba the sort of strong-willed person that was able to do that?

However, Inaba, who had been staring down at Nagase, her lofty aura began to subside.

"...Dummy."

She said weakly and sweetly.

"...By the way, I'm gonna say this first... I'm shocked, okay? I still am... I could cry any second..."

True enough, Inaba was strong, but frail at the same time.

Her trembling and moist voice continued:

"...I couldn't even tell... what my most important friend truly felt... How useless can I be..."

Inaba lowered her head, her jet black hair veiled her features. Frustrated at her own carelessness, her hand clenched tightly on the sleeve of her other hand, as though she was trying to endure her sorrow.

Then, she lifted her head and faced Nagase again.

"But I still have to tell you this! Because I believe it is important for you, and more importantly, it is my wish to tell you this!"

Inaba was frail, but still very strong in the end.

"Nothing went smoothly? Things got worse? Reached your limit? How the hell should I know, I've been failing at everything too! I've wanted to be a smart, charming and cute girl! But I failed! I couldn't even get the guy I like to turn around and look at me!"

*Uh, Inaba might have long succeeded in that aspect already...*, Taichi remarked in his mind.

"How high are your ideals anyway!? We might have unknowingly expected too much from you, but if you were going to perfectly... splendidly answer to those expectations, and thus been overexerting yourself, you're just... being stupid, aren't you!?"

*It's almost like our positions have reversed from then...* Inaba mumbled as though recalling something. What was she referring to when she mentioned 'from then'?

"I'm telling you, your perfectionism is disgusting! What do you mean by 'you can't do it so you have to give everything up'!? Isn't that like saying the you from before was just a lie!?"

Having Inaba predicate her to be a lie, Nagase frantically replied:

"No! ...It wasn't a lie! It was also me..."

"See! By the way I already know what your problem is! You... are just a dualist who had been dividing everything into 'can do it' and 'can't do it' categories!"

As Inaba gave her verdict, Nagase widen her eyes in shock.

"Why do you have to pick sides!? Can't keep up your ideal self from before? So you have to turn into your drastically different, mean and terrible self? What are you, stupid!? Can you be any more extreme? If you can't keep up with your ideal self, then take some time off to keep your

balance! I can't believe you just hold it all in until you blow up in the end, your approach is awful!"

Inaba raved on endlessly, and Nagase, dumbfounded, stood frozen on the spot.

"I'm gonna cut straight to the point and tell you this right here and now! What? You think everyone's anticipating you? Are you nuts? Who the hell you think you are? Why are you acting like some sort of main heroine, huh? You think people are gonna be interested in observing you? Can you be any more narcissistic!? Nobody cares how you want to do it or what you want to become okay? STUUUUUUUUUUUUUPID-----!!!"

Inaba's words were astounding.

It had practically became Inaba's one man show.

Inaba Himeko's word deeply rocked Nagase lori, and Taichi along the way.

Inaba continued:

"We've all got our hands full with our own lives already!"

She dashed on forward.

"It's your own fucking life, live it however the hell you like—!!! And then the rest of us will... I will... just simply accept you—!!!"

Even Taichi, who was not involved in the conversation to begin with, was deeply moved by her. When he finally realised it, he could no longer take his eyes off Inaba.

"You've been working towards the wrong direction! You keep saying things like meeting expectations or not wanting to pretend any further or what your true self is like, those things don't matter! Why did you ignore me, the one that does things the rational way, and stressed yourself on your own!? Think about what's truly important to you!!!"

*What is truly important for us?* Taichi had asked himself that question during the 'Desire Unleash' phenomenon.

"I need a breather!"

Inaba shouted, and started coordinating her breathing.

Her face was drenched in sweat. She wiped her forehead, and took a deep breath.

"...You seemed to be very confused at the time. But even then, you came to the club room today. Why!? And then, when you saw the mess in the club room, you went berserk. Why!? Did you think about how to handle it perfectly? You didn't! Am I right? Try and remember those feelings you had back there!"

Inaba unscrupulously crossed her arms as she finished, and started raging towards a strange direction.

"Why the hell am I explaining your own psyche to you anyway!? You go figure it out yourself, I'm tired, you numbskull! And besides, I'm nobody special either! I'm just riding along the momentum now, so no matter what I do later on, don't you complain to me that 'That's what you said back then!' Don't think that I can put on this strong and mighty front all year long!"

Since a few moments ago, Inaba had been blabbering as she pleased.

"Well... I guess it could be something to do with your past..."

Inaba murmured gently.

"But... You're clumsy, right? Then stop trying to look cool and pushing yourself to do everything perfectly! Just be like me... We would try, we would screw up, we would fall over again and again, but we would never give up, even when we are completely covered in dirt and bruises, we would continue to march on forward!"

Inaba would never give up, even when she was completely covered in dirt and bruises, she would continue to march on forward.

Such was a pitiful sight—Wrong. Such was the most dazzling and charming woman, at least in Taichi's eyes.

Nagase's expression distorted.

"I really... I've had enough already...I can't be like Inaban... not giving up... marching on despite being in a sorry plight... I can't do it..."

Back before, Nagase was one who had felt depressed and sorrowful, and had even cried, but even then, would stand up once again in the end—However, the same Nagase at this moment, said she could no longer do so.

"Iori... Uch..."

Inaba wanted to continue, but stopped herself short.

She looked towards Taichi.

"Taichi... Don't you have anything to say?"

Upon hearing Inaba's question, Taichi reminisced about Nagase... about the person whose name was Nagase Iori.

As he entered high school, he met Nagase in his class. At the time, his first impression of her was that she was very pretty, and would occasionally have his eyes follow her. He had thought they would simply maintain an ordinary classmate relationship, and had never expected to be joining the same club with her. They had gone through many things together, and he slowly found himself attracted to her, and in the end—— he fell in love with her.

Taichi spoke:

"I... I've told you before that I love you, Nagase, yet I've never properly observed you as a person. I've always admired you, so I might have overly idealized you. Hence, I feel it was only natural for you to reject me in the end."

He had been loving the ideal image of Nagase and failed to properly look at the real Nagase.

Even though Nagase had been pursuing her 'ideal self' and hiding 'every other self' from Taichi, he still wished he could have noticed sooner.

"And now, I finally realise Nagase's side that is ideal as well as the side that isn't. And upon understanding this... I've probably said this many times already, but this time, I want to truly convey my message to the real Nagase before me."

Taichi wanted to convey those words to her.

There was no reason, no logic, just a raw feeling from the heart.

"Even then, I still like Nagase Iori."

Nagase widened her eyes.

It was something that Taichi believed from the bottom of his heart, and he had conveyed it to her.

"Ta—Taichi..."

Inaba called to him softly, and Taichi noticed what he just said might have been mistaken.

"Ah! I mean I like you as a person! Let's forget about feelings of love for now!"

That was close, he was almost mistaken... Odd, why did he panic like that? But never mind that, he thought. If he were to proclaim that he liked a person whom he hadn't truly understood until just now with the feelings of love, then he would have been nothing but an arrogant fool.

"Nagase may be very different from my ideals, but even then, I want to be Nagase's friend."

Nagase's widened eyes moistened.

"...Why...Why? You say it doesn't matter even if the person's different from what you imagined, then what is it ...that defines the bond between friends?"

"Who knows!"

Taichi said, attempting to follow Inaba's example. It felt surprisingly pleasant.

*Eh?* Nagase felt puzzled.

"The Nagase from the past and the Nagase before me right now are indeed very different from what I'd imagined and leave a completely different impression. But whichever Nagase chooses to be, I still want to be her friend."

"But... Why?"

"No idea! I want to be your friend because I believe I want to be your friend! I think that's the only thing that matters, so that's all there is!"

Taichi asserted, after which Inaba laughed.

"Ahahaha, yes, it's just as you said. You know it quite well, don't you Taichi. Logics and reasons are trivial, they don't matter as long as you have something to believe in; and even if you feel unsure or worried, all you need is something that you can believe till the end, am I right?"

*But really, what is it that defines the bond between friends?* Taichi repeated Nagase's question to himself.

Their personality? The memories they had built together?

He could not think of a good answer.

But if there wasn't the need of an answer, then there was no harm in not being able to think of one.

Because the only thing that mattered was what he felt and believed in.

All he needed was to ride along the flow, overcome, and run forward. Just like that.

Fools can be very strong, because fools cannot be stopped by any sort of logic.

Seeing two fools like that before her eyes, Nagase stood silent for a moment.

"I'm sorry... I... You two are too amazing... I need... some time to think..."

Nagase had not said another word after that.

□■□■□

Saturday, the day after their club room was ravaged, and which gave Lori a rude awakening.

Classes were not in session, but the CRC decided to gather up at the club room. There wasn't much time left until the club presentation event, so they had to fully utilize their remaining time.

Inaba Himeko had to replenish some supplies for their project, so she took the long route and stopped by the department store before heading towards the school on foot.

Inaba decided to take a short cut through the park.

As she was walking through the park, she heard voices of men chattering.

"—Man, who'd have thought Setouchi would be that awful."

Setouchi. This name had caught Inaba's attention. She immediately recalled the girl who had enmity against Lori and a possible hand in the ravaging of their club room.

There were two vicious looking men, both seemed to be high-schoolers sitting at the bench. Inaba thought they looked familiar. They were probably students from Yamaboshi High.

"Look who's talking. You were enjoying it the most weren't you?"

"C'mon! I felt guilty too! But you gotta admit, it was surprisingly stress relieving!"

They both laughed wickedly.

*Don't tell me...* Inaba thought.

Was it coincidence? No, was it fate? This was probably the first time where Inaba felt so grateful to god.

Her blood began to boil.

"But what are they called again? Cultural Research Club? I kinda feel bad for them, I mean we've completely torn up their stuff for the club presentation."

"Meh, who cares, those were just papers—"

Her blood boiled past the limit.

"So it was you scumbag's doing is it, you piece of shit!!!"

Inaba did not consider the situation and exploded.

"W—What the hell is with her...!?"

"Shut up!"

*Unforgivable, unforgivable!*

What should she do? What did she want to do? Inaba didn't know. She merely approached them.

"But what do... Whoa!?"

Inaba grabbed one of the guys by collar.

"You— Uch!?"

Suddenly, someone locked Inaba's neck by arm from behind, making it hard for her to breath.

"Agh!?"

Her neck was being strangled. She couldn't breath.

"Oi, who the hell this chick?"

She could hear a male's low, hoarse voice from high above her, giving her the idea that her restrainer was massive.

"Did you hit on some girl and say something stupid or something?"

"Really? With that face of yours? Haha!"

More men's voices sounded from behind. One, two... plus the two just now, based on what she could tell, there were five opponents total.

"No! She's the one who popped out of no where and picked a fight at us! Who are you!?"

One of two from the bench abruptly grabbed on Inaba's chin.

"Eh? ...Aren't you one of those from... the Cultural Research Club...?"

"Oh, chick's got good looks~"

The man from behind poked his head forward and said, giving her a dirty grin.

The heat in Inaba's body dissipated and was quickly replaced by a terrible chill.

*What's happening?*

The arm gripping her was rough, she couldn't breath.

This was bad. Five men. Herself restrained. With no way to escape. She feared. She feared.

*I have to get out of here.*

Inaba opened her mouth and bit hard on her restrainer's finger.

"Ouch!"

"Quit moving around... dammit!"

A loud 'Clank!' sounded in her head, her consciousness faded away.

□■□■□

—*We should have just left her there no?*

—*Well, too late for that. We've knocked her out already. She saw our faces, so we gotta find a way to keep her mouth shut.*

—*Think we might have gone overboard, but whatever. It's kinda cool though. Feels like we're in a movie.*

—*Cut the nonsense already! It may not bother the three of you since you're from Akitaka, but the two of us are in the same school with her!*

—*Ah~ Alright, alright, I get it. The girls from Yamaboshi started this dispute, right? Did you try contacting them?*

—*It's Saturday morning, so I didn't get much of a reply... Ah, Setouchi said she'd come. In fact, she seemed to know what's going on.*

—*Setouchi huh...*

—*Let's just wait it out for now. We might get a couple more of those girls to come.*

—*By the way, kidnapping a girl to this kind of place... We could only do 'that' right now, don't you think...?*

—*You wanna become a criminal?*

—*I think we've become criminals already.*

—*Cut the crap, this chick came at us first, it was self-defense okay? Anyway, we'll decide what to do after that girl arrives. By the way, what's with this 'dispute' you mentioned?*

—*Er, we were only told to help break some stuff, I don't know the details... Shit man, this is a disaster. At this rate, the reward we got from the chore ain't gonna cut it.*

This place seemed to be an abandoned factory.

Inaba listened to the men's conversation, her arms and legs tied and her mouth wrapped in duct tape.

*Could this nonsense really happen in reality?* Inaba thought in her head.

### Chapter 8 - The Decision of Nagase Iori

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*[ They shouldn't be able to move an unconscious person very far without a car. Judging from that, the abandoned factory where I'm imprisoned in should be somewhere near the school. ]*

As I pulled my blanket over myself and clasped my knees in my room, I received Inaba's 'Sentiment Transmission' again.

Based on it and the ones I received before, I came to know that Inaba was in danger.

In a situation like this, what would I do?

If I were the ideal me, I would make haste to save her.

If I were the awful me, I would stand back, with the mindset that someone else would save her.

If I were a normal person, I would call the police... No, that wouldn't do. I only had vague information, the police would most likely not do anything.

In that case, I could only ask people I knew for help. Ah, if it were me, perhaps I could get some privilege through Fujishima Maiko?

I came up with all kinds of possible action, yet I was unable to decide on which one to take.

In the end, my action was the same as what the worst me would take.

In other words, I was an awful person.

*Worthless.*

I knew I must confront it one way or another, yet I chose to run away in the end.

I couldn't help but wondered, why did it end up like this?

How would one live, that one would encounter something so absurd like this?

Enough already.

Stupid.

Everything was so stupid.

My life was just too bizarre.

My life was a bit unique compared with others' to begin with (Even though I wouldn't call it a misfortune.) As if it wasn't enough commitment for me already, I had this nonsensical entity, «Heartseed», coming out of nowhere before me.

My life was turned completely upside down.

Due to these 'abnormal' phenomena, my 'present' was changed drastically.

There is no way to undo the past, nor to return things to the way they were. That I agreed.

Which was why I tried to accept my past, and use them as my stepping stone forward, yet...

I was sucked into yet an even more abnormal world. How could I possibly make it out of this?

I hated it. I felt tired. I wanted to give up, wanted it to stop, wanted to stop trying, wanted everything to come to an end—

[ *We'll save her!* ] [ *We must save her.* ] [ *We have to save her!* ]

Taichi, Yui and Aoki's 'Sentiment Transmission' came to me.

This was the first time where three among us triggered the phenomenon at the same time. Did this mean the three of them were carrying such powerful sentiment at the same time?

That feeling... It was so passionate that it felt mesmerizing. It felt bright, beautiful and pure.

Receiving such an overwhelming amount of sentiments, for a moment, I thought they would gush out.

*What an odd feeling*, I mused.

I clasped myself tighter in order not to let these sentiments flow away.

In my blanket, in this darkness surrounding me, I felt I could see the light.

—*We might have unknowingly expected too much from you, but if you were going to perfectly... splendidly answer to those expectations, and thus been overexerting yourself, you're just... being stupid, aren't you!?*

We were under the influence of the 'Sentiment Transmission' phenomenon.

*It's going to be tricky this time*, I thought back when it began. I believed I had to overcome it flawlessly. Not to mention, during this phenomenon, the others would be able to see through my heart. Thinking that my depressing side, which was much different than the ideal me, would be exposed in front of them completely, I became afraid. And soon after, I lost my way completely.

—*You... are just a dualist who had been dividing everything into 'can do it' and 'can't do it' categories!*

I must make it perfect, I must succeed—I had always believed it that way. I could not afford to fail. I had already failed miserably before, so I had been forcing an 'Everything must be handled perfectly' outlook on myself, to the point where it became an obsession. I had been hanging on to a meaningless perfectionism, forcing myself to choose sides. Perhaps that was how I had been keeping up the display of my ideal self.

—*Who the hell do you think you are? Why are you acting like some sort of main heroine, huh?*

Inaba was right. How arrogant could I be? Saying that I lost sight of my real self, putting on a tragic look, and complaining that I couldn't stand these horrifying phenomena. After all, I was not the only one being tormented by «Heartseed». The other four from the CRC had suffered just as much as I had.

—*Nobody cares how you want to do it or what you want to become okay? STUUUUUUUUUUUUUPID-----!!!*

Ahh, I couldn't deny it at all. Why did I think I was being anticipated? In the end, I was merely expecting too much from myself, was I not? And when I overburdened myself, I snapped and took my anger upon the others. How irresponsible could I get?

So clumsy. I was clumsy. I was this clumsy, yet I set such a high ideal for myself.

In the end, I merely lacked confidence in my natural self. I lost track of myself. My perception of things became hazy, so I tagged everything with a value, drew lines between things, attempting to judge everything. Success or failure? Ideal or reality? Truth or lies?

—*It's your own fucking life, live it however the hell you like—!!!*

—*Think about what's truly important to you!!!*

I kept over thinking things. I kept stressing over meaningless things. I kept obsessing myself over doing things perfectly or not doing things at all, and had eventually lost sight of what was truly important to me.

In the end, I was the one beyond help.

However, even then, even if I was worthless, even if I was far from ideal...

—*Even then, I still like Nagase lori.*

Even then, I was recognized.

I fueled myself with that feeling, and urged myself to confront my 'self.'

What had I done wrong? What had I mistaken?

Was my goal to play my perfect self?

No, not at all.

Whether I could play my 'self' perfectly was merely a result.

Of course, it would be nice if I could play it perfectly, but it couldn't possibly be my goal.

It was only simple.

I simply wanted to live according to my own will. That had always been the true goal of my life, was it not?

What did I want to do?

What did I want to become?

These were my goal, right?

Even should I fail, even should there be the potential to fail, if I didn't try to achieve what I desired, then what was the point of my life?

How did I not understand this before? What was I, stupid? I was stupid right? I was so freaking stupid! However, it no longer mattered.

*Stop thinking, I prompted myself.*

Then, what did I want to do?

*Feel it.*

*Just feel it.*

Before I realised it, I had already tossed my blanket aside.

I stood up.

The sunlight beamed onto through the window, embracing me in a pure, white world.

I squinted my eyes, allowing the pure, white world around me to return to its usual color.

My feet guided me to the door.

Aside from the clothes I was already wearing, I sprinted out of my house without taking anything.

I unlocked, and hopped on my bicycle that was parked at the parking lot.

Deducing the location with the information I'd received from 'Sentiment Transmission,' I raced my bike forward.

It no longer mattered.

Theory or common sense or lesson or truth or normal or abnormal or standpoint or ideal or whatever, no longer mattered.

I threw all those shackles away, exposing my raw, leafless self.

Simply following my feelings.

Nagase Iori would become Nagase Iori.

—*Live more freely.*

Ever since my fifth father, who had passed away from illness during the spring of my third year in middle school, had left those words to me, for the first time in my life I felt I had understood their meaning.

□■□■□

This wasn't going to work, my phone calls weren't going through at all. I pedaled my bike as quickly as I could. I had no choice, I had to find her myself.

The way I belted through the streets earned me a few strange looks from people around. I probably shouldn't be thinking this, but I felt exhilarated.

After a bit of exhaustive searching, I finally found what looked to be the abandoned factory I was looking for. There weren't many abandoned factories near the school, so I had a hunch that this would be the place.

I didn't bother to secure my bike. I hopped off and left it aside.

I wiped my sweat off my face and searched for a place where I could peep into the factory's interior.

And then, I managed to find one: There was a broken window high up on one of the walls, and under it were a few old lockers. I climbed on top of them and peeped through the window.

I could see someone moving in the right front of me. They were fairly near to where I was, thus I could see them clearly.

*Bingo!*

Inaba's hands and feet were tied up, her mouth was sealed with a strip of duct tape, and herself lying on the ground.

I couldn't help but to think "You gotta be kidding me, I've only ever seen this on TV and mangas." It was too shocking for me, it took me a bit of effort to adjust to this reality.

I peered around the area.

There were five nasty-looking men, as well as... Setouchi Kaoru.

Seeing that Setouchi was involved in this, I felt an unpleasant spike in my heart.

Setouchi had a dispute with me. However, it was hard to imagine that she had a dispute with Inaba as well. This could only mean that Inaba was implicated by me.

I stopped peeping through the window, and leaned my back against the wall.

Rather than feeling enraged, I felt disgusted. I wanted to throw up, I wanted to scream, but I covered my mouth and forced myself to hold it in.

*This can't be, this can't be, this can't be, this can't be...* I cried in the bottom of my heart.

What was happening? What was going on? I did not know, but it was all my fault. There was no doubt about it.

Tears began to flow.

The heat dissipated from my body, and my legs stiffened.

Why was I so easily shaken? I felt distasteful at myself.

As I finally managed to get myself breathing properly again, I heard sounds of conversation from inside the factory.

"...This is... going too far. This is no joking matter..."

Setouchi said. One of the men responded:

"What were we supposed to do? She's the one who came biting at us! Besides, weren't you the one who started this whole mess? You asked us to screw up their club presentation materials!"

*Ah... Just as I thought. Setouchi was responsible for ravaging the club room. I was sure of it since the beginning.*

"...That's because... everyone told me to do it... I couldn't help it..."

*That and, Setouchi... she's indeed... No, that's not important right now.*

"Don't pass the buck to the others!"

"Ah!"

Sounds of Setouchi screaming and things colliding came from the inside. I quickly peeped back through the window. Setouchi was lying on the ground.

"Oh dear, he just beat up a girl."

The other men jeered.

Judging from what I had seen so far, this did not seem to be planned, but rather an unexpected development. For a moment, I had this thought that these people did not kidnap Inaba to threaten her, hence it wasn't completely my fault. That fact that I was thinking of self-preservation even at this point disgusted me from the bottom of my gut. Anyway, since this was an unexpected development, plus the presence of someone who could lose control from anger, anything could happen from this point on.

*What should I do?*

They had five men, one girl... even though the girl, Setouchi, might not be much of a fighting asset.

But I had only myself: a weak, helpless girl.

I had no weapon, no strategy, nor I had a strong physique or courage.

What should I do? What could I do?

What should I do? My mind was blank. I could not think.

Suddenly, a loud, metallic bang that sounded like someone smashing through iron rang from the factory.

My heart jumped, and I reflexively retreated from the window.

*Puff... puff...* I gasped and clutched my chest. *It's alright, calm down, they shouldn't have noticed me yet*, I told myself. I peeped through the window into the interior again, and moved my eyes towards the factory entrance.

Then I saw them. Taichi, Yui and Aoki, still in their uniform, were standing at the entrance.

They did not bring anything, all empty handed. They did not seem to have any plan either. They merely stood there boldly.

...As I was thinking that, Yui kicked at Taichi and said "You numbskull! Why did you charge right in without checking inside!?" She was really loud, even I could hear her from all the way outside.

The three's sudden intrusion surprised Inaba's kidnappers.

"Who the hell are you!?" "Who let you come in here!?"

Funny they complained when they themselves were trespassing as well. Setouchi, on the other hand, frantically retreated to the corner.

Even though they didn't seem to have a plan, Taichi and the others were not intimidated in the least, and took a firm step forward.

The three of them went to save Inaba, yet I was not there among them. If I went now... No, it was already too late for that. I could only watch from the side.

Perhaps they had realised that the intruders were just three high-schoolers, the five vicious-looking men quickly recovered their composure. One of them headed towards Taichi's group.

"Oi oi, we're busy here! You want a piece of me huh?" The man bellowed with a nasty voice, and...

He was sent through the air by Taichi and Aoki.

The two threw a punch with perfect synchrony, and seemed to have nailed him in the vital. The man collapsed on the floor.

I was in awe at their relentless demeanour.

Up until that point, I had never imagined Taichi or Aoki hitting someone.

This meant that they were very angry... Of course, this was only one of the reasons.

But more importantly, they both wanted to save Inaba.

Through 'Sentiment Transmission,' I was able to tell how strong and pure their feelings were.

They did not consider any logic, nor did they consider any odds.

They merely followed their 'feelings,' that they wanted to do it.

I clenched my fists.

I, too. I felt the same too. My feelings would not be any worse than theirs...

Yet... I could not bring myself into that space. I was deeply disappointed at my cowardice.

Perhaps they were as shocked as I was, the remaining four men stood dumbfounded. But soon, they roared "You bastard, look what you've done!" "You fuckers picking a fight!?" and approached Taichi's group with a furious look on their faces.

One of them picked up what seemed to be an iron bar—However, the outcome had already been decided.

Yui dived among her enemies.

Since I was watching from the high grounds, I was able to see Yui's moves clearly; but for those men, it was as though Yui was flash stepping.

Yui's chestnut-brown hair danced in the air.

The men collapsed one by one.

One down... Two down...

Yui's battle dance was so elegant, one couldn't help but to gasp in awe.

One of the men tried to dive at her, but missed. He then tried to attack her with the iron bar, but still missed.

Three down... Four down.

Before I realised it, Yui had already defeated four men.

Amazing.

Truly amazing.

The outcome was clear. There was no need to verify.

There was no room for me to take part in.

I was unable to be the lead character or the support character. I was merely an outsider.

Even without me, the Cultural Research Club could persist with just the four of them.

"They're gonna wake up soon, hurry."

Yui prompted Taichi and Aoki.

""T—That was awesome!""

"This isn't the time for that... Inaba!"

Yui headed towards the bound Inaba's side.

However, perhaps the battle was too one-sided... It had left an opening.

One of the men that Yui knocked out got up from the ground.

Ah—

If only I could shout and alert them, yet my throat refused to produce any sound. I had completely deteriorated into a bystander.

The man reached for his pocket.

"Eh?"

Yui noticed the man's movement, but she was one step too late.

The man rushed towards Inaba, who was still bound...

And put a knife against her neck.

He shrieked hysterically. He had completely lost it.

I caught a glimpse of Inaba's eyes, her pupils widened in fear.

"W—Wait, stop!" "It's dangerous!" "Put down the knife! Don't do anything stupid!"

Taichi and the others, terrorized, tried to reason with him, but the man had no intention of listening.

"Back off! If you make a move, there's no telling of what would happen!"

The man bellowed, his eyes emitted a dangerous glow.

"O—Okay... I understand, so calm down, okay?"

Taichi said with a softer voice than before in order not to provoke the man. Of course, Taichi and the others did not move.

My body quivered uncontrollably.

What was happening?

What was this scenario? Even if it was a prank by fate, it felt too far-fetched.

The situation was dire.

Right now, there was only one person who was free to act—the person whose name was Nagase Iori.

I was a bystander, but before I realised it, I had suddenly become the lead character and the only one who could save everyone.

If I were the ideal me, I would not hesitate and rush in to save them.

If I were the awful me, I would submit to cowardice and flee the scene.

If I were a normal person... would I call the police? But if the police came, would it further provoke the man?

*Ahh, an idea suddenly came to me.*

*I could just do that!*

If I were the ideal, strong-willed me, I should be able to do it.

It was a reckless idea that would appear extremely pretentious, and require a nerve of steel.

If I pulled it off, I would be able to save Inaba.

But... the current me, the me who had lost all confidence, the me who had given up everything, the weak me... Would I be able to do it?

Could I do it? Or could I not?

Would I be able to handle it perfectly? Or would I not?

—SNAP THE FUCK OUT OF IT!!!

I cursed myself with the foulest vulgarity I could think of.

*That was not the point!* I prompted myself. *Think about what you want to do!*

As long as 'I wish to do it,' then no matter how painful, how tired I was, or how likely I would fail, I would not give up. Even when I was completely covered in dirt and bruises, I would continue to march on forward!

There was no need to question myself about things like ideals, reality or normal.

*What do I truly want to do?*

The next moment, I jumped down from the lockers. I walked around and arrived at the entrance, and rushed in without hesitation.

"Who the heck is it this time!?"

The man shrieked, but I calmly approached him.

"Nagase!" "Iori~" "Iori-chan!"

Taichi, Yui and Aoki called out my name. Inaba, her mouth sealed, also called out to me with her eyes.

"What, are you one of them fuckers too?"

"Ah... Uh..."

I just realised a serious problem.

It was all fine and dandy for me to dive headstrong into the fray in order to seek what was truly important as well as instigate my confidence, but I might have gone overboard... and messed up the procedure of my plan.

*This is not funny. This has got to be the worst joke ever.*

Even stupidity had standard! Even if I was trying to change my methods, this was overboard.

However, I could no longer retreat.

I remained as casual as possible, wearing a cold and jeering smile, and took the first chance to speak:

"Oh my... I was just thinking that, you look troubled, don't you?"

*...Ugh, I've really screwed up the procedure. I really, really should have planned the script more carefully.*

Everyone appeared puzzled. I couldn't blame them though.

"This doesn't look good for you. Want me to lend you a hand?"

I said to the man.

"Huh?"

"Well, you can stick your knife at her all day long, but what are you gonna do after that? You're still stuck in here, no?"

*Send it out send it out send it out.*

I conversed with the man while praying in my heart. Since I could no longer use the phone for this plan, there was only one way to do this. I could only bet on this uncertain factor. Ahhhh, why did it end up like this? It was so stupid.

"I'm saying, do you want me lend you a hand, and get you out of this?"

I skillfully adjusted the angle of my face relative to his view, leaving him a mysterious impression of me.

I believed I could manage.

Believed in my most hated yet favorite 'acting skill.'

"...Huh?"

My proposal seemed to have caught the man completely by surprise, startling him.

"...What's going on... Nagase?"

Taichi asked with a puzzled look on his face.

*Taichi, don't feel so puzzled! Even though it was me who messed up the plan!*

I moved my eyes around slightly. Setouchi was still shrinking at the corner. She was probably too confused to move, so I decided to leave her alone for now.

I lowered the pitch of my voice, and said in a unique tone:

"I've got a few scores against these guys, so I want to help you. The enemy of your enemy is your friend, why don't you think it that way?"

This man would surely like the idea of 'The enemy of your enemy is your friend.'

Its sharpness had been dulled lately, but my 'ability to see through what other people like,' told me that he would like those kind of lines.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend... I see."

The man grinned.

*He fell for it. He really believed it. Why is this becoming more and more like one of those delinquent mangas? Do they even work in reality? By the way can you stop trying to look cool with that knife? I couldn't help but to jab in the back of my head.*

"Iori... What are you saying!?" Yui cried at me.

*Yui, you don't need to fall for it! Even though it simply means my act was convincing enough to fool my friends.*

I wanted to hint them with my eye... but the man was watching. I couldn't risk it.

*Send it out send it out send it out send it out.*

"Okay, what should we do then? Honestly, I don't want this to get any messier either. Speaking of which, those fellas on the ground, they should be getting up soon... Ah, that's right. Wake them up, will ye."

The man gave me an order. Under this development, I could not refuse him.

*There's no time, hurry up and send it out. My 'acting skill' was successful, I just need one more step. After that it's all up to those who are much better than me.*

"Iori-chan, what are you doing!?" Aoki seemed shocked as well.

"...Stop calling me like I'm your buddy okay?"

I responded with an extremely cold, rejecting attitude.

*...No, stop it, don't look so sad at me like that.*

I approached one of the man on the ground. There wasn't much time left, I was already next to the man.

*Please! Let it trigger already, let it trigger, let it trigger, let it trigger...*

*...Goddammit it's not like you'd lose out just to let the phenomenon trigger this once «Heartseed»!!!*

[ Now's the chance! Save Inaban! ]

*Ahh, finally.*

If I were to follow the proper procedure, I should have let them know this at the beginning. I finally managed to send the message out.

A 'Sentiment Transmission' that was transmitted to all four of the others.

Taichi, Yui and Aoki's eyes changed.

*Yes, that's the plan... but don't write it all on your face!*

Now that my plan was conveyed to the others, I would only need to concentrate on gripping the man's attention.

If I was to use the position of the unconscious man and myself as the basis, Taichi's group were being locked at a little left of my front, and the man with the knife and Inaba were located at the wall deeper into the room. The three point rightly formed a triangle image.

The man with the knife had his attention on me, but he would be able to see any movement from Taichi's group from the corner of his view. There wasn't enough opening to disarm him yet. I needed to make him focus more attention on me.

*What else could I do...*

"Oi, hurry up."

The man seemed to be getting impatient. If I acted too slowly, I might raise suspicion.

I knelt and peeked at the unconscious man's face. He seemed to be waking up soon.

*Anyway, let's give him a quick slap—— Ah!*

An idea came to me.

*Yes, this could work.*

I would be going all out, but it wouldn't matter. I had to do it. It was the only way to achieve my objective.

I pushed my face towards the man's.

Slowly, and slowly. In order to get the knife-wielding man's interest, I moved slowly.

I aimed my lips at the coordinate where they would touch with the man's should I move further.

I moved slowly, steadily, dramatically. I could feel the other man's intense focus on me.

I lifted one side of my hair to my ears in an erotic posture.

*...Are we there yet? Crap, no matter how slow I could try, if I keep this up I'm going to touch. Crap, don't tell me I'm going to be... giving my real first to... Crap, should I wait? Would he suspect me? Crap, I'm gonna—*

"Hseeee!!!"

"Guh!?"

I immediately pulled my face back far away from the man before me.

Yui kicked the other man's knife out of his hand, and threw another kick at his face, knocking him out.

Taichi swiftly picked up the knife, cut off the rope that was binding Inaba, and tore the duct tape off her mouth.

Such smooth movements! Amazing, they were strong, really strong indeed.

This was the Cultural Research Club of Yamaboshi High.

"Taichi!"

As soon as she regained freedom, Inaba embraced Taichi tightly. Although he was a little embarrassed, Taichi too happily embraced Inaba back. Seeing them embracing each other, I felt it was a very nice 'Happy End' scene. I thought they looked really nice together.

Thank goodness. It didn't end in tragedy, thank goodness.

The moment I thought that, a string in me, the string that had been holding my emotion together, suddenly snapped.

"Ahh... Uuuu..."

Tears began to stream from my eyes. I backed away from the unconscious man, and sank on the ground.

"...Enough already... I've had enough already! This is scary! I hate it I hate it I hate it! I'm so scared, scared, scared, scared!"

I began crying like a baby, giving up my ideal self, as well as the the feeling that drove me to meet expectations.

"I'm scared to death!"

After shamelessly confessing my feelings, I felt my heart a little lighter.

I showed such a pitiful side of myself, yet it felt unusually pleasant.

I sniffed, and wiped my tears.

Now that I thought about it, I had never said or acted irresponsibly ever since I was little; I had always been a polite, good girl. Could it be that I'd been pushing myself since then?

"Iori!"

Yui jumped at me.

She hugged me tightly. It felt really warm.

"I heard from Inaba... We've been unknowingly anticipating Iori to be an amazing person, and you've been pushing yourself to meet our anticipations. I'm really sorry!"

"You don't need to feel sorry, Yui. It was my decision to do it after all..."

"Even so, I'm sorry! And, and! I was lost when you asked me this before, but no matter what Iori becomes, I still love you! I really really love you! I know Iori isn't a bad person at all! And... Uh... Anyway, I love you love you love you love you very much~~"

Yui started cuddling her head on me.

"Mhm... Thank you. I love Yui too, but this... is too tight..."

I said, and stopped Yui from cuddling me. And then, Aoki said to me:

"Iori-chan! Er, how should I say it... Anyway, everything will be alright!"

Aoki said and gave me a thumbs up.

Sheesh.

This man would always understand what was truly important, and the true nature of things.

Suddenly, a sound of camera shutter came, and I turned my head around. Inaba was taking pictures of the area with her phone. What was she planning to do?

After a while, Inaba was done with taking pictures.

"Anyway, let's get out of here... You should come with us too, Setouchi."

Taichi said to the rest of us, as well as Setouchi, who was trembling in the corner.

□■□■□

Both I and Setouchi were not in our uniforms, so we couldn't head for the school. Therefore, we decided to look for a quiet place to talk instead. After a bit of walking, we managed to find ourselves an empty area along the river bank path. There was a bench and a fountain, and was a good spot to rest while strolling.

"Maybe we should head somewhere else further... Then again this is the opposite direction from the park, we should be fine, should we...?" Inaba murmured.

We began inquiring Setouchi for details, as we all wanted to know how it came to this. We let her sit on the bench, and the five of us from CRC surrounded her.

Inaba threatened her "You goddamn better come clean with us, you hear me!!!?" Though I thought even if Inaba didn't say that, Setouchi would most likely confess everything anyway. Setouchi seemed extremely exhausted. There were dark circles under her eyes. Her brown hair was completely disheveled.

I was mostly right about it.

Setouchi liked Shiroyama Shouto of class 1C and the Jazz Band. She was going to confess to him during Valentine's day, but couldn't pick up the courage to do it. Then she heard about my coldly rejecting Shiroyama's confession, and was extremely upset.

Combining with my provocation and my sudden change in attitude, she began to pick on me. And then there were those delinquent friends of hers fanning the flame to amuse themselves. Soon, Setouchi found herself no longer able to stop.

In the end, in order to provoke me, as well as for the Jazz Band... for Shiroyama, she asked those men to sabotage the CRC's club room.

"...I'm sorry."

As she had confessed everything, Setouchi apologized weakly. She contracted her body, as though she would fade any minute.

"Then, what are you gonna do?"

Inaba inquired me. It seemed she wanted to leave the decision to me..

I stood in front of Setouchi.

Truth to be told, I was in the wrong too. I didn't want to put all the blame on her.

However, even then, even if I was wrong, Setouchi had gone too far.

She picked on me solely because I rejected the guy she liked. She got the others who had nothing to do with this involved, Inaba was even beaten in the head for this. Not to mention, the materials for our club presentation were completely destroyed beyond restoration.

She did all these irresponsible things only because of anger and hatred.

Even if I disregard her victimizing of me, I still couldn't forgive her for involving the others.

I really wanted to unleash all my searing anger on her and make her regret everything she had done. I wanted to yell at her, swear at her, and burn the same amount of pain she had inflicted on us onto her soul—I had never felt this angry before.

The others were watching me from the side.

What should I do?

If I were the ideal me, would I say it couldn't be helped and generously forgive her?

If I were the awful me, would I vent all my anger directly at her?

If I were a normal person... If I were a normal person?

Inaba's words reechoed in my mind.

—*Why do you have to pick sides!?*

But, weren't things divided into 'normal' and 'not normal' to begin with?

—*You think people are gonna be interested in observing you? Can you be any more narcissistic!?*

But, if I weren't normal, wouldn't I attract attention?

—*It's your own fucking life, live it however the hell you like*—!!!

But, to be normal...

What was normal?

Ahh, finally... I finally... Crap, my eyes were all watery. Were these tears of joy? This could be one of the reasons. Was it because I realised how stupid I was for not noticing it all these times? This could be another reason.

I had been binding myself with meaningless standards.

Normal people would do this—I had been worrying myself over this all the time.

Which was why I had been dividing things into 'This is more ideal than normal' and 'This is worse than normal,' and using these as my principle, and thus trapping myself in a forever looping cycle of choice as though I was acting.

I reminisced my life.

When my mother divorced, I met a new father for the first time. He was a man who would resort to violence whenever he got drunk.

Therefore, I tried to act as a good, obedient girl to appease that man.

And then, my mother divorced again, and remarried again.

I was only a little girl back then, but I had already felt the need to get along with my new father. Therefore, I tried to act as the good girl in that man's eyes.

It had been that way ever since.

Ever, ever, and ever.

No matter who I interacted with, I had always been trying to act as a good girl.

This was the main reason I was stressing myself like an idiot before.

My notion of 'must act as a good girl,' as I grew up, had become 'must adapt to my social circle.' In other words, I began to make comparisons in search for a 'basis,' obsessing myself with the question of 'what is normal.'

To keep myself above normal.

To make myself better than normal.

If at all possible, to become more superb, more perfect.

If I stopped reminding myself to act as a good girl, then I'd be unable to become the person that everyone anticipated. I had always believed it that way.

I had no confidence in my original self. I was unsure. I compared myself with those around me, in hopes of finding a standard called 'normal,' and contemplated on what kind of ideal image I should be maintain.

I pretended that I didn't care, but in actuality I had been worrying about how others would see me the whole time.

I had called out on Inaba for that reason before, but as it turned out I was not much different than her. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. Even though our causes were somewhat different, but our worrying about how others would see us were the same. Ahh, how embarrassing.

It shouldn't have mattered at all.

*It's your own fucking life, live it however the hell you like—!!*

Yeah, Inaba was completely right.

Meanwhile, Setouchi peeked at me with a puzzled look.

I realised that I must have stood still for a very long time, completely forgetting the situation before me.

...

I was too happy, my anger had completely disappeared into the air.

*...What should I do then? If I don't do something, I won't be able to end this properly.*

*Whatever~ I'll just stop thinking, I prompted myself. I let my feeling guide me.*

*—Is that okay?*

My common sense and rationality asked me.

*—Yup, that's okay!*

I answered determinedly, shaking off my shackles.

"Clench your teeth!"

I hadn't spoke with this cheerful voice for a long time.

I could see the shock on Setouchi, Taichi, Inaba, Yui and Aoki's faces.

*Aha~ What's this? I feel so happy.*

But of course, I wasn't exactly feeling happy for what I was about to do next.

It was more like, the shift in my mood was too great, which was why I was told that I was too dramatic, and that I was emotionally unstable. Then again, I couldn't help it. I had been feeling pretty depressed lately, but now I felt absolutely ecstatic. You have a problem with that?

Nagase Iori was such a person.

"Clenched your teeth?"

"Eh... Eh?"

Although puzzled, Setouchi closed her eyes anyway, her lips pressed tightly together.

"Here I gooooooo—!!!"

Using every last ounce of strength I could muster, I slapped Setouchi across her face with my palm!

My palm felt the impact... *Ow, it hurts!* At the same time, Setouchi flew from the bench and went rolling on the ground.

Setouchi stopped rolling, and became motionless.

She remained motionless.

"Ah... Eh? Did I hit too hard?"

"...Oi, that wasn't a slap, that was more like a palm strike, no?" "...That was a flawless straight palm strike." "...Such force." "...I wouldn't be surprised if she gets a concussion from it."

The others seemed intimidated.

*T—That's because I've never actually slapped people before! I didn't know how to adjust my strength okay! Ow... My palm still stings...*

Ah, Setouchi moved a little.

"A—Are you okay? I'm sorry, I hit too hard!"

I rushed to her side, and lifted Setouchi.

"Uu... It hurts... Uuuu..."

Setouchi held her hand against her left cheek and cried chokingly.

"I'm sorry... I'm really sorry... I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

I was worried earlier that, what if she got mad from it, but it seemed my worry was unnecessary.

She had indeed realised her mistake, and regretted over what she had done.

This feeling was conveyed.

There was no need for phenomena like 'Sentiment Transmission.'

"I'm sorry."

I crouched and said quietly to her, my eyes looking into Setouchi's.

"By the way, that slap just now, was for everyone else but me. Don't worry about mine."

"Eh?"

Setouchi appeared shocked.

"Ahaha, surprised? Well, truth to be told, I was in the wrong too. So I guess we're even now. There you have it... Will you forgive me?"

"I don't have any rights to say forgive or not... It was all my fault to begin with..."

Setouchi replied sobbingly and shook her head.

I decided to tell her what I had noticed during this conflict.

"Can I ask you something? Whenever I see you, Setouchi-san, I would have this 'Could it be?' hunch."

Setouchi Kaoru dyed her hair and wore a earrings, and was always hanging around delinquents putting on a delinquent demeanour, but...

"Setouchi-san, you're actually a good girl at heart right?"

"Eh?"

Setouchi, seemingly confused, froze at my statement.

"Why did you force yourself to become a delinquent?"

Upon hearing my question, Setouchi's already teary eyes shed a couple more tears.

"That... That was because... I... The guy I liked before... I was... trying to appeal him... So I..."

With just that, I had completely understood.



She changed herself in order to appeal the other, and in the end, she was no longer able to stop.

Even though we were of different type, but judging by 'being bound by unnecessary restrictions, not being able to become what you truly want to be,' I and her were one of a kind.

Perhaps it was exactly because we both were one of a kind, that we disliked each other, rejected each other.

Clearly, that was not what we were supposed to be doing.

We were companions; dense companions in being unable to become what we wished, unable to display the perfect selves. If we could work together, even when we are completely covered in dirt and bruises, we would simply continue to march on forward, because working alone, relying on oneself alone like that is in fact, extremely difficult.

Actually, would it be too late to begin now? Could I still make up with my own power?

"Hey, Setouchi-san, what kind of person would you like to become? How would you like to live?"

"...Eh? Uh..."

"Ah, sorry, I supposed it was a bit sudden and sounded a little abstract... Let's see... Okay! I think that, Setouchi-san, the you at the moment, seem to be pushing yourself... like doing things you didn't want to do at all. So, I want to know what kind of person you really wanted become and things that you really wanted to do."

Setouchi, whose face was completely soaked in tears, was completely dumbfounded.

*Say, how many times have I seen Setouchi looking so shocked today again?* Random thoughts like that emerged in my mind... Not that I could help it.

*But, she looks really cute like that.*

"I... I can't... Someone like me..."

Setouchi murmured in a weak, nervous voice, and lowered her head without finishing her sentence.

"You can try tell me! Don't be shy! You can do it!"

I tried to act a little more passionate.

"Eh?"

*Aha~ Her reaction is really cute indeed.*

"...I....I.... really... I know it doesn't suit me, but I wanted to work harder and participate in club activities, or join the student council... and... with Shiroyama-san..."

*Ah... I see, I thought. She really was a good girl, a girl who wholeheartedly wanted to pursue her love. It was probably something I could never do myself.*

However, that was how Setouchi wanted to live. It was a life that was different than mine.

"Then, why don't you go for it? Why are you giving up without even trying, and being all wiggly and venting on others? ...That being said, I'm not that much better myself, yet I'm lecturing you like this. Sorry!"

I decided to apologize first and anyway. After all, those words were also for myself. It was my personal monodrama, okay?

Setouchi was so shocked that her tears stopped flowing, wearing a utterly confused look on her face.

I spoke once again:

"Ah, Setouchi-san. Why don't we become friends?"

I, Nagase Iori, wished to do that.

Companions who were similar, would definitely be able become good friends.

As I told her that, I stood up and turned around.

Inaba Himeko, Kiriyama Yui, Aoki Yoshifumi, and... Yaegashi Taichi. They were all welcoming me with the brightest smile on their face.

*Sheesh, I thought. What's with these people?*

They were too nice.

So wonderfully nice, they were impeccable.

I felt so happy, I almost cried.

What should I say?

How should I act?

If I were the ideal me, if I were the awful me, if I were the normal me——I waved goodbye to my tag-and-compare methods of life.

"Thank you all! Nagase Iori is now back in action! I've caused so much trouble for everybody, I'm really sorry!"

I felt it was important. More importantly, I wanted to do it. Hence, I apologized and performed dogeza<sup>[7]</sup> on the spot.

That was how it ended. We had gone through many things, and there were many things we had to deal with afterwards, but this entire commotion had finally come to its end...

——It should have been that way.

However, we'd never thought that one of those men who kidnapped Inaba would coincidentally passed by.

He was still carrying the iron bar from the abandoned factory.

We were careless.

The man bellowed and charged at Inaba.

Taichi, who tried to protect Inaba, stepped in between them.

A loud, ominous *Clank* echoed through the air.

### Chapter 9 - The Turning Point for Yaegashi Taichi

Taichi subconsciously felt that he was unconscious.

It felt conflicting.

He felt he was floating in a warm, relaxing space.

He couldn't move his body—no, he couldn't feel his body.

Only his sentiment.

A voice echoed in his mind. It felt like 'Sentiment Transmission.'

[ *Were we ever in love with each other?* ]

Taichi replied to the voice:

[ *I think we were... At least I believe it that way. Even though it was a premature love.* ]

[ *I guess you're right, I believe so too... I'm sorry. I've been an immature girl.* ]

[ *No, I should be the one apologizing. But, thank you.* ]

[ *No, I should be thanking you. Really. Thank you very much.* ]

[ *I never looked at your true nature properly, I've only been pursuing an ideal image all these time...* ]

[ *No, not at all... Did you?* ]

[ *I'm pretty sure I did...* ]

[ *That being said, I'm very happy that you're willing to fall in love with me... Honest!* ]

[ *Ahh... Thank you.* ]

[ *I had loved you too.* ]

[ *Had loved...?* ]

[ *...The I in the past really did love you, but that was when I was clueless about many things, and misunderstood many things. And then... I've changed.* ]

[ *Indeed, you really have changed.* ]

[ Or should I say I've returned to normal? In any case, I've changed. For me, it was a very dramatic change. Not just from this time... Tons have happened after all. ]

[ Yeah. ]

[ Hence I want to restart everything from scratch... Sorry, I'm being so irresponsible. ]

[ Not at all. If I went through that much as well, I would choose to do the same. Not to mention, I think your change was great. And speaking of irresponsible, I could say the same for myself too. I mean, I did love you, but truth to be told... it felt like I only indulging myself about being in love. ]

[ Ah, I know how that feels. ]

[ You do right? Because... love is amazing. ]

[ It is amazing! How should I put it... It's too complicated for words! ]

[ I was thinking, love is irresponsible to begin with right? Of course, it's best to be honest with each other, but there's no reason to be bound by responsibility, or worry about what the other thinks and keep holding yourself back... right? Though I must admit I'm just copying a certain somebody. ]

[ Love is a difficult question... In fact, I'm not even sure if I understood the meaning of being friends. But I'm not supposed to think about these with logic right? ]

[ Er... I don't know the answer to that either! ]

[ Right? Hm~ I'd say, it would be like the feeling falling in love with someone, or someone falling in love with you. The sentiment in your heart, feel it, think about it... ]

[ And then one step at a time, slowly advance forward. ]

[ ...Ew, you sound like an old man! ]

[ Don't call me an old man... ]

[ Then~ Hurry up and go out with someone already. ]

[ Yeah, you're right. Speaking of which, I could say the same for you too. ]

[ Mhm. Though, that someone..., ...won't be either one of us again right? ]

[ I... thought so too. How should I say it, we... Ours was an extraordinary love, did I say it right? ]

[ Yup. I was thinking of that too. It was premature, but it was without a doubt, real love. And exactly because of that... there's no way for us to easily mend it. ]

[ Right. ]

[ By the way, this conversation is embarrassing! There's no way I could say any of these if we were face to face, not even on the phone. It's only at this time, in this place, that I'm able to say it. ]

[ Should we thank this situation... this phenomenon? ]

[ Hell no! I hate it. In no way would I even think of thanking it! Ah, it's almost time... Say, how did I even know? Actually, what's even going on right now? I suppose I haven't been sleeping well lately. I was about to collapse so I kinda took a nap... What's the situation right now? ]

[ ...You know, I think we're better off not to worry about it too much. ]

[ ...I guess. In that case, I have something to tell you in the end! ]

[ I have something to tell you too. ]

[ It's great to be able to fall in love with you. ] [ It's great to be able to fall in love with you. ]

His body's senses were returning.

His mind was beginning to sync with his body.

He could sense light underneath his eyelids. His could hear noises with his ears. He could smell a unique stench and a sweet fragrant with his nose.

Taichi reached out towards the light.

He reached out his hand.

□■□■□

Taichi tried to move his hand.

His right hand was wrapped in a soft and warm touch.

He grasped the touch in return.

He grasped tightly, so as it wouldn't slip away.

His sight returned.

He narrowed his eyes from the light's sting, and slowly focus his sight.

Before him, was a tear-filled-eye'd—Inaba Himeko.

"Taichi! Taichi!"

As though wanting to lean her entire body on Taichi, Inaba hovered over him, calling his name.

Taichi found himself lying on the bed.

"...Morning, Inaba."

Her tears were about to come out. Taichi released her hand and brushed her eyes gently.

"Thank goodness... Thank goodness! Even though it was a metal bar... it was thin and light... I knew you'd be okay... but if something happened to you... if something happened..."

"Don't cry, Inaba."

Taichi said and pet her head softly.

*What happened to me?* Taichi tried to recall. He remembered that... a man suddenly charged at them to attack Inaba, so he stepped in between them to shield Inaba, and was hit in the head, and then... was he knocked out?

Taichi peered around the room and realised it was the school's nurse's office.

Since he wasn't sent to the hospital, and with only Inaba by his side, it shouldn't be too serious... Hopefully.

Inaba seemed to have noticed Taichi's concern, and began explaining to him.

"Oh... The others are keeping watch outside in case those people show up again. They also need to make a few contact with others..."

"I see."

Nagase should be taking a short nap at the moment, but the bed next to him was empty... Hmm, why did he know Nagase was napping? He

remembered a strange dream. Was it a dream...? No, even though it was a dream, he was fully conscious, so there was no doubt about it, it had to be reality, it had to be real...

Taichi sat up. His body seemed alright as he did, though Inaba immediately said to him "You need to lie down a bit longer!" Taichi touched his head. He could feel a thick piece of bandage on his forehead. It stung a little when he pressed on it.

"Stop pushing yourself... I'm serious... If anything happened to you, I... And if it was because of me..."

Inaba struggled to hold her tears. At that moment, Taichi found her very dreamlike, very frail, as though she would break upon the slightest touch. He needed to protect her—More importantly, Taichi wanted to protect her.

"You're... I... I—"

*[ I need you. Very much. I can't be without you. I love you really much. Love you. Love you. ]*

It was Inaba's 'Sentiment Transmission,' her honest and genuine feelings flowed into Taichi. This feeling overflowed and flooded Taichi's heart, overwhelming him. He felt as though he would be completely washed away.

"Wait... That's.. not... I mean it's... but don't listen..."

Inaba shook her head and covered her face. He could see her cheeks blushing scarlet from between her fingers.

*[ Love you so much. Love you and love you. Love you. Love you. Love you. In love with you. Loving you. Love you. ]*

Inaba's 'love' embraced Taichi. It felt very... warm. Very comfortable. Very happy. Very passionate. Very endearing. He felt his mind at peace.

Was he ever this needed before?

He was needed so much, he even wondered whether it was a dream.

And then, himself.

He indeed had the notion of 'wanting to repay this feeling.' Taichi would not deny it. But it wasn't all there was: He, too, needed Inaba.

Inaba taught him many things. Inaba made him realised what was truly important. Inaba pointed out that he was a 'selfless freak.' Inaba worried for him for that, and would always watch over him, keeping him in line. Inaba encouraged him to take the first step in many different ways. Inaba took up all kinds of burdens with him. Inaba tried harder than anyone to tell him how much he meant for the others.

It was all thanks to Inaba, that he could become what he was today.

They could complement each other's flaws.

If they worked together, they could accomplish many things.

*Is it really okay?* Taichi asked himself.

Even though it had already ended, he had been in love with another person the whole time.

However... If he listened to his heart, if the other had been wishing for the same...

After all, she had been patiently waiting for him all these times, even until now. If he could already see the conclusion, there was no reason for him to hesitate anymore. Taichi didn't want to keep her waiting any longer.

This time, he would engage in a solid, down-to-earth relationship.

He desired to do so.

Hence, Taichi spoke.

"Can we... Will you go out with me?"

His word flowed surprisingly smoothly.

Inaba's expression blanked, and was completely frozen.

She remained still for about a minute before she finally recov—

"Ehh..... EHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!?"

Just as Taichi was about to say she had finally came to and recovered some color on her face, Inaba flushed her cheeks bright red and became extremely confused.



Then, she started combing her already beautiful black hair with her fingers.

"A—Am I pretty?"

She asked Taichi. She seemed very confused.

"Mhm, very pretty."

Taichi answered simply. Was it because he had just woken up? He did not feel embarrassed at all.

"I—Is that so... No! What am I talking about!"

Inaba shook her head. Then, with her legs together, her hands on her knees, she sat up straight in a ceremonial posture on her chair.

"Uh... Ah... That... Really... It's... That's... But..."

She lowered her head, hiding her scarlet cheeks from view. For a long time, she would try to say something, and would struggle to put her words together properly. But Taichi silently watched over her.

Soon afterwards, Inaba raised her head and looked straight at Taichi's eyes.

And then, she answered to Taichi's proposal.

".....Yes."

### Epilogue - A New Chapter for Nagase Iori

«Heartseed» suddenly appeared before me, Nagase Iori.

He possessed Gotou Ryuuzen, and appeared before me when I was alone, just as he did before towards Aoki and Yui.

I asked him what he wanted alarmingly. He answered: "I think it's time to end this... I don't know why... But I feel it's better that I tell this news to Nagase-san..."

Rather than horrified, I felt disgusted. Actually, I wanted to beat him up very badly.

That being said, I didn't expect that he would choose me of all people as his audience for the ending announcement... It almost seemed he was telling me that, he had been watching my every move since the start.

"I just thought of something: during the time I was depressed, it seemed that whenever I was thinking of something malicious, 'Sentiment Transmission' would transmit those feelings to the others. It was intentional, wasn't it? You purposely chose the darkest feelings among my confused, disarranged sentiment and sent them to the others."

It was terrible. It was part of the reason why I kept believing myself to be a cruel person, even though I did almost lose myself to that spectrum.

"Not really... Those were mostly Nagase-san's, your own... not-exactly judgement... were they not?"

*Uh-huh, uh-huh. Is that so. As if.* I snarked in my head.

"Ahh... In that case... ——Look at the bright side, at least it's over now... Don't you think so?"

*How should I know.*

"It's almost time... to move onto the next phase..."

"Next phase..."

*I don't like the sound of that. I really don't like the sound of that word at all.*

"Ahh... But who would have thought, that I would establish this kind of relationship with you all... I've always believe this to be interesting, but

this has surpassed my expectations... I am an odd one after all... ain't I? Perhaps that's why a presence like that one decided to intervene..."

«Heartseed» thought he was an odd one... It seemed. He was an entity beyond our imagination, yet his remark made him seem human. Could it be that we had overlooked something important on «Heartseed»?

That being said, even though I didn't quite feel it at first, now I... began to feel scared. I thought I was slowly getting used to it, but apparently it was still kind of unnerving to deal with «Heartseed» on my own.

"Well then, it's almost time... I should be going..."

«Heartseed» said and turned around to leave.

Now that I thought about it, «Heartseed» was merely possessing Gotou's body. If he had to leave, he could always do so by leaving Gotou's body on the spot. Yet, «Heartseed» rarely ever did that. Why? Was it because it would raise suspicion if Gotou found himself waking up in unfamiliar places too many times? It was just my instinct, but for some reason, I kept feeling that it was not the case.

Was I the only one who felt «Heartseed» had changed a lot since we had first met?

"Hey, your relationship with us... When will it ever end?"

I did not expect him to answer, so I was merely mumbling to myself.

However, this must be one of those crazy days, or maybe he really had changed:

He turned around back towards me.

"That, of course... I do not know."

Just as I thought he was going to answer me properly too. How disappointing.

*Thought so*, I muttered in my heart. «Heartseed» was vague as always. He would never give us any solid answer.

*In the end, nothing had changed...*

Just as I thought that...

Perhaps something did change after all.

"Ahh... However—"



Monday. Setouchi Kaoru came to school wearing black, short hair. She had completely redid her once brown, long hair. At first, nobody realised it was Setouchi, and asked "Who's that?"

Her change was completely unexpected, hence there was a minor commotion in the class.

Setouchi's friends were too bewildered to talk to her. In the end, it was I who started a conversation with Setouchi:

"You're still wearing those earrings."

"Mmm. I really like these earrings."

"Say, Kaoru-chan... Don't you think you look amazingly cute right now!? The pure, innocent style suits you perfectly!"

"Iori! Are you trying to say I wasn't cute before!?"

I and Setouchi, ...Kaoru had become friends.

As we laughed and bickered, my friend——Nakayama Mariko came over to us.

"Whoa, whoa, what is going on~!? Tell me, Iori~"

I had treated her horribly before, yet she was still willing to smile at me.

I felt really lucky. I was very happy that I was able to have such great friends!

I had been thinking before. I must apologize to everyone, and explain many things to them. However, it seemed I didn't need to worry too much anymore.

"Just as I thought... as expected from students of class 1C. Well done."

Our ever lofty class representative——Fujishima Maiko, mumbled to herself.

By the way, it was probably my imagination... but those creepy stares from Fujishima, which had disappeared for some time, seemed to have reawakened... Or was I just being paranoid?

Due to that incident, we hardly made any progress in our preparation this past Saturday and Sunday. Therefore, on Monday, the CRC immediately began working on the club presentation. I, too, worked as hard as I could to make up for my slacking off before. Setouchi volunteered to help us as well.

The materials that we had managed to prepare before the presentation event, compared to what we had made before, were not exactly what we could consider outstanding.

However, due to the detailed data we had obtained from our investigations, and the oral report skills we had learned from endless rehearsing, plus the performance that Inaba suggested to me (She said: "You have to do this at least to make up your part,") our CRC presentation still managed to be very successful.

By the way, Inaba's suggestion was to have me, accordingly to the content being introduced, performing a 'Nagase Iori's instant changing cosplay show.'

Ahhh~ It was extremely embarrassing just thinking about it.

Maid outfit, cheongsam, pro-wrestling suit ("That's definitely a gorgeous bikini!" by male audience.) ...Fine, I admit I was very enthusiastic on the stage! Actually, it was more like I had completely given myself up!

Because of our, in a sense, legendary presentation (it might even become an unhealthy tradition,) not only did it earn the CRC a high score, it had also became a hot topic in the teacher's office. Needless to say, Gotou heard about it too. He then came to us and said:

"You guys... especially Nagase, have worked really hard. Those from the Jazz Band too... Ah, I've seen their performance. It was the most superb performance I've ever seen. They must have practiced for a long time. Seeing the efforts of both clubs... I am deeply touched even though I hadn't paid much attention about it the whole time! I couldn't bring myself to abandon either side, so I've been thinking, whether there's anyway to continue to be both club's advisor."

It was a touching speech... That was, if you ignore the part after this.

"I thought about it, then I realised one thing: Due to regulations, I can only hold the position of a club advisor for one club. However, my actions are not restricted at all. If that's the case, I can just continue to be the advisor

for the CRC, and visit the Jazz Band to practice with them. That way, we can preserve our existing status... Hoho, how's that? I analyzed the rigid notion of choosing only one side from a whole new perspective, and came up with a completely different solution! I'm a genius...Ow ow ow ow, t—that hurts, Inaba-san!"

"You should have done that since the start if that was the case, you freaking moron—**!!!**"

Inaba performed a grappling hold stance on Gotou.

I had been wondering, where did Inaba learn these moves? I should ask her later.

Those men who abused and kidnapped Inaba were no longer a problem.

Since it was Inaba who initiated the aggression plus the fact that we had also physically attacked them, they were not sent to the police. However, Inaba seemed to have utilized the photos she took from the abandoned factory and excercised a little bit of public power through Fujishima's father, and did some work behind the scene.

In any case, allegedly those men would no longer cause anymore trouble.

...That being said, as they were discussing countermeasures, Inaba and Fujishima both emmited a dark and sinister aura. I was too terrified to inquire them for any details.

And then, Taichi and Inaba started going out.

Yui and Aoki were surprised, but congratulated them nonetheless. I, too, congratulated them as I would myself.

"...Is this really okay?"

Unsure of herself, Inaba asked me hesitantly, but I replied her from the deepest depth of my heart: "I and Taichi's love had already ended. You don't have to worry."

I had originally thought that, even though Inaba might bully Taichi from time to time, they would surely become a cute, heartwarming couple. However, I had never expected Inaba to be completely open about her deredere side.

She was so deredere, I could no longer dub her 'Inaban,' but 'Dereban' instead.

Would she be able to restrain herself a little before the new semester starts?

...At this rate, it might become annoying.

Thinking back, my life was certainly a colorful one.

Many, many things had happened.

It might sound odd coming from me, but would it be a little too dramatic?

*Should I write them into a book in the future?* I thought half-seriously and half-jokingly.

But it was all thanks to them, that I was able to learn many things. This was the truth.

This time, too, I had realised what truly mattered in life.

If I hadn't realise it, I would have missed out on a significant part of my life—It really mattered that much.

It was so simple and natural. People might even wonder, how come I hadn't realise it sooner?

However, to 'truly understand what truly mattered in the most meaningful sense,' and not just superficially, was actually easier said than done.

Follow your will. Live a life that you like.

That was very important, but at the same time, very difficult to understand.

Needless to say, this didn't mean I could just do whatever I want simply because I wanted to.

Sometimes, one must calmly observe the situation and carefully plan ahead—Like what I and Taichi did when Inaba was kidnapped.

And then one must never trouble the others—Like how both I and Setouchi lost control of ourselves this time.

I believe both to be very important, but if I obsessed myself over either side too much, I would lose sight of my true goal.

How rational should I be? How considerate should I be? Even if I spent my whole life trying, I would probably never be able to find a sure answer.

I could only keep thinking, keep trying, and as close as I could, reach out for the correct answer. Especially for clumsy people like me. I should never give up easily. Even when I was completely covered in dirt and bruises, I must strive for the best.

This was probably the first time since I developed a sense of awareness, that I understood the meaning of 'be honest to yourself.'

I envied those who were able to realise that naturally without the need of any extraordinary event. I really thought those people were amazing.

But for someone who tends to misinterpret things like me, they would need to take a longer path.

But even if I had to take the longer path, it did not necessary mean that I would fail.

I knew I could do it.

I had already realised that.

Now then, as someone like that, what should Nagase Iori do?

Perhaps love after all?

Love is a wonderful thing.

My most important first love had taught me that.

I could never thank him enough. Thank you.

Well then, the climax of my life, my first year in high school, was nearing its end.

Actually, scratch that. It would be too early to call this the climax of my life.

Life is a long journey. You would never know what is coming next.

It could be something so dramatic that it would dwarf everything I had experienced so far.

I mean, simply promoting from first year to second year meant that there would be many new encounters.

And after promoting, we would be changing our classes, and then there would be new students.

Would any of those new students join the Cultural Research Club? But they might catch the attention of those bizarre entities. I believed we must consider this carefully.

If possible, I hoped to get a kouhei or two to join, and participate in club activities together happily.

As long as we were happy, there would be no problem.

I was still immature. I had brought many troubles to people around me. At the same time, I had received many help from people around me.

I hoped that one day, when people around me were in trouble, I could help them the same way they did me.

To help, and be helped. I would continue to live that way.

Believe in the path I had chosen.

Believe in this path I walked on, and it would become my path.

To find my true self, was to believe in myself.

It wouldn't matter even if I failed on the way.

Because by then, people around me would surely reach out to me.

March on forward.

Enjoy my life today!

Ah, speaking of which.

Could what «Heartseed» said back then be true?

"—It will be alright... I can... already see the path to the ending..."

Really?

**[Kokoro Connect 4 Michi Random (Random Past) The End]**

### Author's Notes

Thank you for picking up this book.

<Michi Random> is the fourth volume of the <Kokoro Connect> series after the first <Hito Random>, the second <Kizu Random> and the third <Kako Random>.

I am Anda Sadanatsu, who had been always nagging about "The author had already announced the official abbreviation of the series, yet it didn't seem to spread through the readers!"

Kokoroco!

Before I realised it, this series has already published its fourth volume. Thank you for all your support and encouragement, I will do my best and not disappoint your expectations. Thank you in advance!

Kokoroco!

<Kokoro Connect> is now advancing towards multimedia stage. The first would be what I had promoted in the last volume, the manga of <Kokoro Connect> is now running on Famitsu COMIC CLEAR. The manga is free for browsing on their official website. Please do check it out. The characters drawn by CUTEG-sensei are very pretty and attractive, I'm sure everyone would like them!

And then, <Kokoro Connect> will be adapted into drama CD! Thanks to the original script (Many thanks to Shimo Fumihiko-shi, who wrote the script. I helped a little as well.) and the wonderful cast of voice actors, the final product is amazing. It is scheduled to be on sale on 16th of February, 2011. Please do check it out!

It may sound odd for me to say 'by the way,' but I would like to announce before hand that, the next volume will be a collection of short stories. Aside stories in the past, it will also include a story after the current timeline. Please look forward to it!

...I seem to be promoting the whole time, allow me to apologize. Due to page limitation, I did not really write anything that look like Author's Notes... That being said, I do not have any unnecessary things to say.

Kokoroco!

Now, my thank-you speech. Thank you very much to readers who have been supporting since the volumes before this. This book would not have come to be without you, the readers. And to those fan who had sent mail to me, even though I am unable to reply individually, your support is a great encouragement for me. Thank you.

And then, with editor-sama first, and all of those who helped with the publishing of this book, thank you very much to you all. I really wish to thank each of you individually.

And Shiromizakana-sensei, the characters you have drawn for each volume are beautiful! I will do my best to make my novel content match those beautiful illustrations. Thank you very much.

Finally. Once again, I wholeheartedly thank every reader who picked up this book.

December 2010, Sadanatsu Anda.

## References

1. [↑](#) Giri-choko (義理チョコ) & Honmei-choko (本命チョコ): Obligation(Giri-) chocolate are given to friends and colleagues, while Favorite(Honmei-) chocolate are given to loved ones. There also exist tomo-choko (友チョコ) where Tomo- means friends.
2. [↑](#) White Day (ホワイトデー): In Japan, Valentine's Day is typically observed by girls and women presenting chocolate gifts, usually to boys or men, as an expression of love, courtesy, or social obligation. On White Day, the reverse happens: men who received a "chocolate of love" or "courtesy chocolate" on Valentine's Day are expected to return the favor by giving gifts. Traditionally, popular White Day gifts are cookies, jewellery, white chocolate, white lingerie and marshmallows.
3. [↑](#) This exchange between Yui and Aoki: ギリギリで義理, was meant to be a cold joke in Japanese, as ギリ (giri), where ギリギリ means something like 'just managed to be,' is pronounced the same as 義理(giri) of giri-choco. Hence, it would be read as "Girigiri de giri," to which Aoki responded with many more 'giri'.

4. ↑ Translates: What is this guy talking about all of the sudden?
5. ↑ Translates: Inaba Himeko has always believed this man to be an idiot and today she is able to confirm it once more. This man is an idiot. A freaking idiot. Fuck you.
6. ↑ Viva: Italian for long live. Kawaii: Japanese for cute.

↑ Dogeza(土下座): is an element of Japanese manners by kneeling directly on the ground and bowing to prostrate oneself as touching one's head to the floor, as a deep apology(as in this case with Iori) and to express the desire for a favor from said person. 'Prostration' in English performs the exact same gesture, but in a cultural sense it tends to lean more towards a submissive or worshiping and lacked the formal, apologetic notion.



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×力-でさわ(笑)